



Sermon Transcript September 20, 2020

The Gospel The Gospel: What It Is Romans 1:16-17

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 20, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Romans 1:16-17

¹⁶ 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 to faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Introduction

This morning we begin an eight week series we are calling “The Gospel.” It is a journey through Romans 1-5. We begin this journey with these two very familiar verses, Romans 1:16-17. *“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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”*”

These two verses are Paul’s thesis statement for the book. Grant Osborne says it this way, “In four short clauses Paul summarizes what his letter will be arguing, that salvation is not a humanly controlled phenomenon but comes entirely from God.”¹ Paul is telling us in these two verses what he is going to tell us in the rest of the book. So Paul begins his thesis statement for the book of Romans by saying *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel.”* In this statement, Paul is identifying the theme of the book of Romans. It is a book about the gospel. You could say it this way. The gospel is at the very heart of the book of Romans. And the gospel is at the heart of the book of Romans because of what it is.

The gospel is at the heart of the book of Romans because it rests deeply in the heart of Paul, the author of this book. What is in Paul’s heart flows from his heart to his pen and onto the pages of this book. He says in verse 1 that his whole life is *set apart for the gospel of God*. These two verses are not just the thesis statement for the book of Romans. They are also the thesis statement for Paul’s life. Because the gospel occupies Paul’s heart, he says in verse 15 that *“he is eager to preach the gospel.”* And of course, in our verse this morning, he boldly says, *“I am not ashamed of the gospel.”* That is a negative way of saying, “I am appropriately proud of the gospel.” Paul readily identifies with the gospel and centers his life around the gospel. The gospel is at the heart of Paul because of what it is.

The gospel is at the heart of Romans because it is at the heart of Paul. And the gospel is at the heart of Paul because it is at the heart of God. I am struck by what Paul says in verse 1. In saying that he is *“set apart for the gospel”* he says of this gospel that it is *of God*.” The gospel originated with God before the world even began. He says of this gospel in verse 2 that *it was promised beforehand through the prophets*. Before Jesus ever set foot in this world, the gospel was at the heart of God. The gospel is at the heart of God’s plan. It is something that comes to us from God. In our verses this morning, Romans 1:16-17 we hear that this gospel is *“the*

power of God” and *in it the righteousness of God is revealed*. The gospel is what God is about. God is at the beginning, the middle and the end of the gospel. The gospel is at the heart of God because of what it is.

So here is the question for you and for me this morning. Is the gospel at the very heart of your life? Is the gospel at the very heart of my life? Is the gospel at the very heart of our life, collectively as a church family? If the gospel is at the heart of Romans and if it is at the heart of Paul’s life and more importantly, if it occupies the heart of God . . . does the gospel occupy your heart, my heart and our heart?

There are a couple reasons why we need to ponder this question. I don’t think we should quickly dismiss this question with an assumption that the gospel occupies the center of our hearts. I want you to think about it this morning. The word *gospel* comes from the Greek word *euangelion*. It is the word from which we get the word *evangelical*. The name of our church is Wethersfield EVANGELICAL Free Church. Aside from being a mouthful, our name conveys that we desire to be “gospel” people. Traditionally that is what it means when we say we are “evangelicals.” It means that we believe the gospel is at the heart of who we are.

Thomas Kidd is a professor of history at Baylor University. His specialty is in the history of religion in America and he has written a lot about the history of the evangelical movement throughout the history of our country. You should know, that he too is an evangelical, a Southern Baptist, and so he is writing with a critical eye from inside the evangelical “tribe.” In his book titled, *Who Is An Evangelical?*”, he says that the traditional definition of an evangelical is those who “are born again Protestants who cherish the Bible as the Word of God and who emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.”² In other words, traditionally, the gospel has been at the heart of what it means to be an “evangelical.”

But I ask the question once again. Is the gospel at the very heart of our lives as evangelicals? There is cause to stop and ponder this question. There is cause to wonder whether or not the gospel still occupies the hearts of evangelicals. Since we (WEFC) are among them, we must ask this question of ourselves as well. There are two things that cause me to question whether the gospel still holds the place in our lives that it holds in Romans, in Paul and most importantly in God’s heart. It is what evangelicals today believe and what evangelicals today treasure that causes me to wonder whether or not the gospel still occupies the center of our hearts.

What Evangelicals Believe

It is interesting to consider what evangelicals in America believe today. Under the direction of George Barna, Arizona Christian University last month released the results of a survey on religious beliefs in America. The surprising feature of the survey is not so much found in what Americans as a whole believe about God and faith and Jesus. But the disheartening revelation about the survey is what those who call themselves “evangelical” believe.

New research shows . . . American adults today increasingly adopt a “salvation-can-be-earned” perspective with a plurality of adults believing that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things during their life, they will “earn” a place in Heaven . . . Most surprising from the latest finding in the American Worldview Inventory 2020 is that a majority of people who describe themselves as Christian (52%) accept a “works oriented” means to God’s acceptance. More shocking, huge proportions of people associated with churches whose official doctrine says eternal salvation comes only from embracing Jesus Christ as savior, believe that a person can qualify for Heaven by being or doing good. That includes 41% of evangelicals.³

One of the interesting findings of the survey is that 63% of adults in America believe that having some type of religious faith is more important than which faith a person aligns with. In other words, it is having faith in faith itself that is important not who you put your faith in or in whom you put your trust. “Shockingly, a large majority of people who describe themselves as Christian (68%) embrace that idea, including 56% of those who attend evangelical churches, even though such thinking conflicts with the teaching typical of such churches.”⁴

If the gospel is going to be at the heart of your life and my life, then we have embrace it for what it is. If it is something that is of God, then God tells us what it is. God defines it for us. We see in our passage this morning that in the gospel *the righteousness of God is revealed*. It comes to us from God and it is revealed to us in what has been written and in the person and activity of Jesus. Paul does say in verse 9 that this gospel of God is the “*gospel of his Son*.” It ultimately has to do with Jesus. Paul says in verse 16 that the gospel is *the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*. It leaves you asking the question, “believes in what?” It is not just a belief in belief. It is a belief in whatever makes up the gospel.

I understand that in this “evangelical church” I am talking to a wide range of people

at various points in the journey of faith. Some of you are aghast at the idea that those who claim to be evangelical would waffle on what we would consider to be core to our faith. But there may be others here who are honestly wrestling with some of the core beliefs that comprise the gospel. One of the features of Romans is that Paul often raises the question that everyone is thinking, and I assume some of you may be thinking. And then he responds to it. May this be a safe place for you to wrestle with your questions. There may be some here who are offended by the claims of the gospel. Don't be surprised if that is how you feel. The gospel does have a way of offending our sensibilities. Tim Keller says that when Paul says, *I am not ashamed of the gospel* that the word *ashamed* can also be translated *offended*. In other words, he is saying that he is not offended by what the gospel communicates to us. But he understands that the gospel often does offend. For example, Keller writes, "The gospel is really insulting by telling us that Jesus died for us. It tells us that we are so wicked that only the death of the Son of God could save us. This offends the modern cult of self-expression and the popular belief in the innate goodness of humanity."⁵ If that is how you feel this morning, I hope you at least give these next eight weeks a chance. It is not our goal to be offensive in how we preach Jesus. But we can understand how you may feel offended by it. But Paul was someone once deeply offended by the message of the gospel. And since it is the *power of God* what may now seem offensive can become the thing that changes your life.

Part of my aim over the next several weeks is to let Romans define the content of the gospel that Paul is not ashamed of and is eager to preach. If the gospel is at the heart of our lives, then it matters what we believe.

What Evangelicals Treasure

The second thing that causes me to question whether or not the gospel is at the heart of many evangelicals is because of what we tend to treasure more than the gospel. I don't know if you are aware of this, but there are many who feel that the evangelical movement is in a state of crisis. That is one of the reasons why Thomas Kidd wrote the book *Who Is An Evangelical?* He asks the question because the word has lost its original meaning. What it means to be an evangelical in our country has shifted to the point that some are questioning whether or not we need to come up with another term to describe those who are "born again . . . cherish the Bible as the Word of God and who emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ." We belong to the Evangelical Free Church of America—the EFCA—and I have been in those conversations and I have attended those seminars that ask the question: "Can we

recover the original meaning of what it means to be evangelical or is it so lost to us that we need to come up with another word to describe those who keep the gospel at the center of what they believe and how they live?

In our culture, the word “evangelical” is now associated more with politics than it is the gospel. An “evangelical” is now a voting block to be courted. At the heart of what it means to be an “evangelical” in our culture today centers around American patriotism or trying to become a “Christian nation” or winning a culture war. When that is the focus we lose sight of the gospel and we replace it with an emphasis on morality. It doesn’t mean that we can’t address the evils that plague our society, we should. But when our focus is winning the culture war we get sucked into fighting for the wrong thing and fighting the way our world fights. Under the banner of “God and Country” evangelicals have become militant as they engage their culture.

Cap Stewart said it this way in his article “If You’re Fighting the Culture War, You’re Losing.” He said, wars are won by striking hard and hitting back. He calls into question whether or not that is the tone we are to take towards those you may disagree with or consider your opponent. He observed, “We mock those in opposition to us, using the popular rhetoric of sarcastic memes, name-calling, and condescending language—forgetting that we are to communicate “with gentleness and respect” and to “walk in wisdom toward outsiders” by letting our “speech always be gracious.”⁶ Perhaps that can be one way to gauge whether or not you treasure the gospel. Check the tone of what you post and how you engage with those you oppose. When we treasure the gospel we love our enemies.

Another way Tim Keller highlights how the gospel offends us is by highlighting what it calls us to. He says, “The gospel tells us that our salvation was accomplished by Jesus’ suffering and serving (not conquering and destroying), and that following him means to suffer and serve with him.”⁷ That is the battle Christians are called to. We are not called to fight fire with fire. Instead we are called to pursue intimacy with God and express charity towards our neighbors. If we want to “steal back” what it means to be evangelical then: the Scriptures need to be at the center of our preaching and singing, public and private prayer needs to be our way of life and the Lord’s Supper needs to be regularly and reverently observed. Douglas Coupland said that this won’t be easy because it is not popular. But he said, “churches that fail to do these things will fade away, because they have nothing to pass onto their biological and spiritual children.”⁸

So as we make our way through Romans 1-5, we are not just looking at what it is we

are to believe. But we also want to consider what it is we are to treasure. When we treasure Jesus and the gospel above everything else it forms us into gospel people. That is what leads Paul to write what he writes in Romans 12:14-21 where he calls us to “*Bless those who persecute you . . . repay no one evil for evil . . . live peaceably with all . . . overcome evil with good.*” It is a radical and counter-intuitive way of life that flows from a heart that treasures the gospel. That is what the word *evangelical* ought to mean in Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church.

The Gospel: What It Is

Why is it important for us to take a good look at the gospel? Why is it important for us to clarify what it is we believe? Why is it important for us to ponder what it is that we treasure? It is because of what the gospel is. Paul says two things about the gospel in our passage this morning. He tells us “what it is.” The gospel is *the power of God* and in it *the righteousness of God is revealed*.

The Power of God: I can’t tell you how many times I have glossed over that statement and have not pondered the impact of it—*the power of God*. There is nothing more powerful than God. Next week we are going to look at God the Creator. And Paul says in Romans 1:20 that through what God has made *his eternal power* is on display. God spoke this world into existence. God brought light into darkness through the power of his word. When God confronted Job with the question, “*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*” At the end of that confrontation, Job humbly said, “*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*”

At the beginning of his gospel, John says, “*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” Harold Senkbeil put it this way, “The Word by which everything was created is none other than the eternally begotten Son of God come down from heaven to take on human flesh in Jesus.”⁹ John tells us that in Jesus was life and light. The power of God through Jesus is on display in that “*to all who did receive him, who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*” So it is not just sheer power that is on display in the coming of Jesus. Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of the love of God most displayed for us when he died for us on the cross. It is the power of God’s love.

So when Paul declares that the gospel—which he is *eager to preach*—is *the power of God* he is saying that it has the power to bring light out of darkness and to bring people into relationship with the living God. Senkbeil says that “God’s word is performative

speech.”¹⁰ In other words, when we proclaim the gospel it *is the power of God for salvation*. It has the power to change the heart. It has the power to set people free from the bondage of their sin and their guilt. It has the power to bring eternal life and to conquer death. In fact, that is what the word *salvation* is referring to here. It is referring to the kind of deliverance that enables us to say with great hope, *even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil*. That is the power of the gospel. That is why Paul is not ashamed of it. The same power that brought creation into existence resides in the proclamation of the gospel. The same power that was displayed when Jesus took on flesh and died in our place is on display in the proclamation of the gospel.

I love universal appeal of the gospel. Paul says that it is for *everyone who believes*. There is no person who is beyond the reach of God’s power to deliver them from sin and death. There is no one too far gone for God’s power through Jesus to forgive. There is no one who has done too much for God’s power to change the direction of their life. The power is not in you and the power is not in me. The power is the gospel faithfully proclaimed. The power is not legislation or in cleaning up your act. The power is in the gospel faithfully proclaimed. Don’t lose faith in the power of the gospel.

The Righteousness of God: The reason Paul is not ashamed of the gospel is because it is the power of God. The reason it is the power of God is because *in it the righteousness of God is revealed*. In other words, the gospel tells us how we are made right with God. It tells us how we are brought into right relationship with God. Is there anything more critical in life than being made right with God?

So the good news offered here is that you can be right with God. But it is in the gospel that the way we can be made right with God is revealed to us. Remember this is the *gospel of God* (1:1). It is the *gospel of his Son* (1:9). It is *the power of God* (1:16). It is the *righteousness of God* (1:17). It is *of God*. And so we would not know what it looks like to be made right with God or how to be made right with God if God had not revealed it or made it known to us. And so what we discover is that our right standing with God is something that is offered to us by God. It is something we receive from God through Jesus. That is why Paul says, that it *is from faith to faith*.

John Piper summarizes for us in six points what has been revealed to us in the gospel.¹¹ Point #1: The Gospel was planned. It originated with God before the world even came into existence. Point #2: It involves an event in history. In history, Jesus, who was God in the flesh, died on the cross for our sins. Point #3: The Gospel is an achievement.

Something was achieved by Jesus on the cross. It was an achievement accomplished between Jesus, the Son of God and God the Father. Sins were paid for by Jesus. Point #4: What was achieved by Jesus on the cross is freely offered to the world. If it is not free, it is not the Gospel. Point #5: We receive this free forgiveness that God offers through faith alone. We don't earn God's favor. We receive it simply by faith in Jesus. Point #6. The goal of the Gospel is that it brings us to God! Peter said, in 1 Peter 3:18, "*For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*"

We never outgrow our need for the gospel. Paul ends this passage by saying that "*The just shall live by faith.*" Sometimes we think that the gospel is just the A-B-C's of the faith. We might be tempted to think that it is the elementary things of faith. We might think that the gospel is just the entry level for faith. But when Paul adds that the *just shall live by faith* he is reminding us that the gospel is not just the A-B-C's of the faith. It is the A to Z of faith. It is the way we live our faith. There is not a day that goes by where we don't need to confess our sin, rely on what Jesus has done for us on the cross and submit ourselves to the lordship of Jesus.

Conclusion

The gospel is at the heart of Romans because it is at the heart of Paul. It is at the heart of Paul because it is at the heart of God. The question we are asking this morning is whether or not the gospel occupies the center of your heart, my heart, our hearts. This series applies to all of us.

We have seen how easy it is for us as Christians to get our eyes off of the gospel. It will be good for us to be reminded of what it is we believe and what it is we most treasure. For it is the gospel that will hold us and enable us to be of good in a world that is hurting and needs to hear and see the love of God through Jesus and his people.

I also recognize that there are people tracking with us who are at various places in their faith journey. Some are feeling drawn to Christ. Some are more skeptical. Wherever you happen to be, we are just glad you are processing with us. We are excited to share with you what we believe and what we treasure the most: the gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ. We are not ashamed of it and we are eager to declare it because we believe it is the power of God to deliver you from sin and death and in it you are brought to the living God who deeply loves you and through Jesus Christ has made a way for your sins to be forgiven.

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- ¹Grant Osborne, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004) 39
- ²Thomas Kidd *Who is an Evangelical?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) 4
- ³George Barna, American Worldview Inventory 2020 www.culturalresourcecenter.com
August 4, 2020
- ⁴Ibid
- ⁵Tim Keller *Romans 1-7 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2014) 18-19
- ⁶Cap Stewart “If You’re Fighting the Culture War, You’re Losing.”
www.thegospelcoalition.org, September 4, 2020
- ⁷Keller, 19
- ⁸Douglas Coupland “Steal It Back” blog.ayjay.org October 8, 2016
- ⁹Harold Senkbeil *The Care of Souls* (Lexham Press, 2019) Kindle Location 838
- ¹⁰Ibid., Kindle Location 1019
- ¹¹John Piper www.thegospelcoalition.org/video#src=the-gospel-john-piper

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What commitments do you want to make to each other as you get started this fall?
2. How are you feeling the effects of the lingering pandemic? What challenges/threats do you feel it is bringing to you? What opportunities has it brought to you?

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Romans 1:16-17. In what situations do you find yourself being ashamed of the gospel? How can verses 16-17 turn your shame into eagerness to share the gospel?
4. Think of the various ways the gospel “offends” people.
 - How does it offend moral and religious people?
 - How does it offend people who value autonomy?
 - How does it offend people who want life to be safe and comfortable?Which of these do you relate to the most? Why?
5. How does the universal appeal of the gospel (everyone who believes) encourage you to share the gospel with others? How does it encourage you to know that the gospel is “the power of God”?
6. Think of a sin you struggle with. How does believing the gospel help transform you the next time you struggle with that sin? (For example: If I struggle with forgiveness it is knowing that God forgives me that give me the strength to forgive)

Taking It Home

7. What is one thing you are taking from your study?
8. As a group develop a prayer list of people you would like to see turn in faith to Jesus.