

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
Paul's Letter to the Romans – Chapter 1, Verses 18-32
Notes from Tuesday July 27, 2010
Last Revised on July 31, 2010

Songs

Opening Prayer

Introduction

Last week we read and discussed Verses 8-15 of Chapter 1 of Paul's Letter to the Romans.

We also read Verses 16 and 17 and began to discuss them.

We will continue discussing verses 16 and 17 this evening, before reading on,

possibly to the end of Chapter 1.

Review

Please turn to your text and look with me at the first 15 verses of Chapter 1.

Together the first 15 verses contain all, or almost all, of the material that is strictly introductory.

Some commentators put the first part of verse 16 ("For I am not ashamed of the gospel") with the introduction.

Having read these verses, we now know that this is a letter written by Paul.

We know that he wrote to all the Christians in Rome.

We know that he wrote in his capacity as an Apostle of Christ, so that what we are studying, is not an ordinary personal letter, but an apostolic one.

Paul writes as an authorized representative of Jesus Christ to Christian believers.

Although Paul has not yet been to Rome, we know that he longs to go there,

that he hopes to bless and be blessed by the believers there,

and that he wants to proclaim the gospel there,

just as he has done and will do in so many other places.

He is certainly not ashamed of the gospel,

which is the thought expressed in the first part of verse 16,

and surely the end of the introductory material.

Starting in the middle of verse 16, Paul goes on to explain the gospel more fully.

Before reading on, however, I think it will help us to go back and quickly review what Paul has already said about the gospel in the first six verses. (Please look there with me.)

He tells us in the very first verse of this letter that he is “set apart for the gospel of God.”

This is probably best understood as meaning that Paul is “set apart for the work of proclaiming God’s message of good news” (Cranfield)

We understand then that the gospel is not from Paul or about Paul (or from or about you or me).

The gospel is God’s message of good news, which Paul [and we] must work to proclaim.

What then is “God’s message of good news” which we work to proclaim?

It is, Paul tells us, in Verse 2, that which God promised beforehand through his prophets in the scriptures.

It is, Paul tells us, in Verse 3, a promise concerning his Son who was descended from David according to the flesh.

And this Jesus, Paul tells us, in Verse 4, was declared to be the Son-of-God-in-power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.

The message of good news which Paul works to proclaim, then, is the fact that Jesus of Nazareth has risen from the dead, proving that what God promised beforehand to Israel has been fulfilled.

It was from the risen Lord himself, Paul tells us in Verse 5, that he received his apostleship to bring about the “obedience of faith” for the sake of his name [***not only in Israel, but***] among all the nations.

There are several possible meanings for the phrase “the obedience of faith” and I have suggested that perhaps it would be best to understand this as “the obedience which consists in faith.”

That is, Jesus sent Paul to proclaim, among all nations, the message of good news concerning himself: that he has risen from the dead, in fulfillment of scripture, so that many would have

faith and glorify his name, including those in Rome who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

This much we can understand about the gospel from just the first six verses of this letter.

But as is evident from the length of this letter, Paul still has a lot more to say about the gospel.

Now let's drop down and reread verses 16 and 17 and continue our discussion from there.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 1, Verses 16 and 17

Will someone please read Romans, Chapter 1, Verses 16 and 17, in Japanese.

Thank you. Now will someone please read it in English.

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 for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

As we have already discussed sufficiently, last time, Paul is full willing to go to Rome and is not ashamed to proclaim God's message of good news there or anywhere.

In the latter part of verse 16, after the comma, Paul further explains his readiness to proclaim the gospel by saying that to everyone who believes, the gospel is the power of God for salvation.

He makes it plain that this indeed includes *everyone*, not only the Jews from whom Jesus was descended and to whom Jesus initially comes, but to all the gentile nations as well.

But he also makes it plain that this applies to only those who believe.

The world is now divided not so much into Jew and Gentile, as it is divided into those who believe the gospel and those who do not --- the living and the dead.

The word "salvation" is ordinarily understood to mean 'salvation from death and destruction.'

With eternity now in view, this implies "salvation unto blessed eternal life."

But what is it that they believe, those who will inherit blessed eternal life?

Surely it is not enough just to believe something ... anything....

That Jesus is the son of God who in accordance with scripture was born, died, rose again, and

ascended to the right hand of the Father.... these are all facts which are presumably known to a host of demons, none of whom shall ever know a blessed eternal life.

Indeed the demons in Hell may possibly know other true facts about the kingdom of God besides the ones I just listed, but there is no collection of facts that can add up to anything that is, for them, a message of good news from God.

The gospel is only the gospel to those who are being saved by it. To everyone else, as Paul says in 2 Cor. 2:16, it is the fragrance of death.

So what kind of faith, then, is found in the hearts of those who are called to belong to Jesus, and who are being saved by the gospel?

Verse 17 says: "For in it [---- that is in the gospel concerning His Son ---] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith.""

All those who are being saved by the gospel, possess a faith which perceives in it not simply the basis of their own salvation but, also, the revelation of "the righteousness of God."

It is important to understand that such faith can not exist in anyone until they hear the gospel; the faith is not there before the gospel arrives; the gospel elicits such faith; and so, truly, the proclamation of the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

It is the gospel which finally divides the whole world into two camps: life and death those who perceive the righteousness of God revealed in Christ, and put their trust in him, and those who do not.

And so what is the "righteousness of God," revealed in Christ, that all God's children believe?

There are two main possibilities, regarding how to read the term "righteousness of God," here in verse 17

One is to understand that righteousness here is an attribute of God, himself, or of his activity. In other words those who are called to belong to Jesus will perceive in Christ the revelation of the fact that ours is a righteous God --- One not merely omnipotent but also faithful to his people, true to his word, consistent with himself, and etc. Of course all these things are true and part of God's marvelous perfection, but that does not necessarily mean that this is what Paul has in mind here, in verse 17, when he refers to "the righteousness of God."

The other possibility is to understand the "righteousness of God" as man's righteous status as the result of God's action in justifying him. In other words we understand that our sins have been forgiven and that God now considers us to be completely innocent because Jesus paid the price for all our sins on the cross at Calvary. Of course this is true also, and will be more clearly what Paul has in mind elsewhere, but is that what Paul means to say just here, in verse 17?

These two general categories can be further subdivided. For example if the “righteousness of God” is suppose to be understood as man’s righteous status as the result of God’s action in justifying him, then is this justification merely a matter of God imputing the righteousness of Christ to us, or does he actually make us better somehow?

There are those who press for a fairly narrow definition of the term “righteousness of God” when reading verse 17. But I think we might be better served to take a wide view.... to hear the full range and depth of possible meanings.

Almost the only really bad mistake we could make here would be to somehow fall into the error of thinking that the “righteousness of God” is something for which we can take credit or could achieve on our own. There is no such righteousness.

Surely those who are called to belong to Christ, finally do perceive in him a revelation of the righteousness of God which is imputed to man because of what Christ accomplished on the cross--- by his stripes we are healed.

Surely we also perceive in Christ a revelation of God’s own Righteousness: his faithfulness and loving-kindness directed toward his children on the one hand and his holiness and wrath directed against the unrighteousness of man, on the other hand.

In every way, it seems to me, believers will see in Christ the revelation of God’s Righteousness, and no righteousness, of any kind, coming from the works of man. There is no such righteousness.

The quote from Habakkuk, “the righteous shall live by faith,” seems, to me, to support this wide view of meaning of the term “the righteousness of God.”

In the vision of the prophet, those who waited patiently on God were considered righteous, and it was because of their faith in Him and his faithfulness to them, that they were foreseen to live.

And part of what the righteous were faithfully waiting for, in Habakkuk’s vision, was for justice to be done and God’s righteous wrath to be visited upon the unfaithful, those who supposed that God’s wrath would be delayed indefinitely.

The ESV margin gives an alternative translation: “The one who by faith is righteous shall live.”

In other words, God reckons us to be righteous and allows us to live because of our faith in him, and now more specifically, our faith in His righteousness revealed in Christ.

Finally, before leaving verse 17, we notice that the righteousness of God is said to be revealed “from faith for faith” At least that is how the ESV translates this phrase..

One sees various other translations of this prepositional phrase and several interpretations. But I think most of them underscore the absolute necessity for salvation of first hearing the gospel proclaimed and then responding to the gospel in faith,

meaning that upon hearing the gospel proclaimed, we actually do, by God's grace, perceive in it the revelation of God's Righteousness, and the basis for our salvation, and so we decide to trust in that righteousness for our salvation.

Without hearing the gospel, there can be no faith,

without faith in the gospel, there can be no salvation.

I honestly don't think we have the first 17 verses exactly right, yet, but I think we are getting close.

And I think our understanding will continue to improve as we continue reading the letter.

After all, if Paul could have made his point in only 17 verses, he would not have written 16 chapters!

Does anyone else have any questions or comments before we move on?

OK, then. Let's move on.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 1, Verses 18-20

Will someone please read verses 18-20 in Japanese.

Thank you. Now will someone please read those same verses in English.

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

Thank you.

Remember what went before, Paul has just said, in verse 17, that our life depends on our faith in the righteousness of God revealed in Christ.

Now, in what we have just read, we learn that God's wrath is part of this same revelation.

Verse 18 reads:

(Verse 18)

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

Wrath is a word which, in humans, describes extreme anger which builds until finally it expresses itself violently in acts of vengeance or retribution or justice.

The word may describe either the emotion or acts which express it.

When we use this word to describe a being or an object other than a human, this description cannot be understood literally,

but must be understood as a figure of speech, called anthropomorphism, in which we try to describe something or someone that is not a not a human being as if they were: ... storms “rage,” animals “love,” God displays “wrath”

God is a personal being, certainly, but he is more than a human being, and so when Paul speaks of the “wrath of God,” we must be careful not to image that God possesses or exhibits such human emotions and behaviors that we normally associate with the word.

Calvin was always quick to point out that, whatever the wrath of God is, it is not the human emotion which goes by that name and which, in we humans, is always co-mingled with sin.

In the best humans, at the best of times, rarely and briefly, we may sometimes observe a behavior or perceive an emotion that we describe as wrath and, yet, judge to be worthy and nearly without sin.

Usually these would be times when the strong and good and unselfish person comes to the defense of the weak and innocent who are themselves completely helpless against that which is unmistakably evil. We love to watch movies like that, where the saintly hero comes to the rescue of the innocent and vanquishes evil. In such cases we welcome wrath. Within such a context, wrath is good!

OK then, take the best human example you can think of --- of an instance when human wrath seemed to you utterly good and necessary and desirable --- and then purify that a thousand times, and you would still not be close to describing the purity and goodness of God’s wrath.

God’s wrath is a good thing, like everything else about God!

God’s wrath is never directed against anything that is good or allied with anything that is evil but, rather, is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

Ungodliness and unrighteousness are two words used here to fully describe one thing: sin.

God is eternally and utterly opposed to sin, by definition.

Sin is by definition that to which God is opposed!

Here we are told that the sinfulness of man suppresses the truth.

This, if I have understood Paul correctly, is because our sinfulness suggests that either there is no God, or that God is not really good, or that God does not care so much about sin, or that God is unable to overcome sin.

And none of these things are true, in the slightest.

This is how our sinfulness suppresses the truth.

But God's existence, and his goodness, and his absolute opposition to sin, are revealed from heaven, and sin is overcome, on the cross of Calvary, and in and through the proclamation the gospel.

Every time the gospel is proclaimed, God's righteousness and God's wrath are fully revealed, and those who hear are given a choice between the two: trust in his righteousness and live, or suffer his wrath and die.

This had always been understood in an imperfect and preliminary way by the faithful in Israel, who had many and various foreshadowings of the Gospel.

But finally in the cross, all can understand, that sin is a lie which God has eternally overcome.

All who shall live, live because God's wrath was poured out on his Son: God forgives us without condoning our sin, because Jesus paid the price, he drank up the wrath, because he suffered the just penalty for our sin.

Perhaps here the difference between God's wrath and human wrath can be most clearly seen.

What happened on the cross of Calvary was no fit of unpremeditated anger, but something something unspeakable wonderful, prepared from before the beginning of time, something in which Jesus waked willingly to save us.

But those who will not have Jesus, will experience instead that which we call God's wrath, which is nothing more or less than what we all deserve, apart from Christ.

One way or the other, all sin must be put away

Sin is finally impossible in a universe ruled by God and must be done away. The Cross of Calvary is how God accomplishes this and saves some men from destruction without ever

condoning any sin..

Verse 19 reads:

(Verse 19)

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

I think this refers back to the last part of verse 18 which says that by their unrighteousness, men suppress the truth.

Here Paul adds the thought that this is not something we do by accident.

We actually do know that what we are doing is wrong, that it is contrary to the will of God, that it is sin, because God has shown us enough about himself, his perfect goodness, to make this clear to us.

Here Paul probably has Gentiles especially in mind, because the Jews had much more information about God revealed to them through their prophets and their scripture.

But even apart from scripture, Paul means to say, God has revealed more than enough about himself to all men, both Gentiles and Jews, for all to be guilty of wilfully disobeying God.

Surely this is true. Verse 20 reads:

(Verse 20)

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

God is spirit, and no man has ever seen God.

Nevertheless, Paul says, ever since the world was created, through the things that God has created, men have clearly seen what God is like:

Specifically we understand that he is eternal, powerful, and divine.

I am not sure what exactly Paul meant when he referred to God's "divine nature" but I must presume he meant that man perceives through nature that God is immeasurably greater and better than man.

Let me just remind you that man is chief among the things God made, and that this is one part of God's creation regarding which we have special "inside" information.

If we look inside ourselves, and examine our moral sensibilities in particular, we will find

things there that are hard to explain, except for the existence of God, and not just any God, but the One who is, the God and father of Jesus.

God's nature and his character shines forth sufficiently for us to be aware of and responsible for our sin, because we willfully do what we know clearly to be wrong and against God's will,

but our sin so corrupts us, that we are incapable of honoring God or even wishing to obey Him..

What truth we have of God from nature, we willfully suppress. So we are all without excuse.

Questions?

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 1, Verses 21 -23

Will someone please read verses 21-23 in Japanese.

Thank you. Now will someone please read those same verses in English.

21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Thank you

Here again Paul may have the gentile lands especially in mind, or gentiles as the Jews commonly perceived them.

Because the main difference between Jews and Gentiles was that whereas gentiles worshipped all manner of worthless and even abhorrent and ridiculous idols, the Jews had clung faithfully to the worship of the True and Living God.

Or had they? The godly Jew reading these words would not forget the Golden Calf and all the other times which Israel, which of all nations should have known better, devolved into pagan idolatry.

Indeed the Jewish scriptures go out of their way to record such incidents.

Likewise Christians, then and now, realize that we are always hovering on the edge of idolatry.

Verse 21 reads:

(Verse 21)

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

A statement like this applies to all men,

and it applies especially to religious men: Israel, the Church, individual believers.

because we know God, but do not honor him as God, or give thanks to Him.

so we become unwise and corrupt. Knowledge of God does not prevent this.

In fact

(Verse 22)

Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

To know God while disobeying and dishonoring him is the worst kind of foolishness.

(Verse 23)

and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

When we stop looking for the glory of the Invisible God

we very soon begin worshiping that which is visible.

The Old Testament story of the Golden Calf is the prime example.

Israel did not mean to exchange Yahweh for a chunk of gold shaped like a cow, nor did they suppose that that was what they were doing.

They became impatient with Yahweh's invisibility and made a glorious golden statue through which to worship him!

That is what idolatry is.

Israel, and the Christian Church, and individual believers fall ever into it.

When we have focused on the images and symbols and signs and stopped looking for God's invisible glory, we are finally without God.

 Questions?

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 1, Verses 24 -27

Will someone please read verses 24-27 in Japanese.

 Thank you. Now will someone please read those same verses in English.

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;

27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Thank you.

 So we see that God did not abandon Man.

 He made the whole universe for us, and so that we could see his invisible glory in it.

 But we took bits of God's creation and made our own images and worshiped them.

 And so we repressed our knowledge of God and effectively abandoned Him.

 And he let us.

 Verse 24 reads:

(Verse 24)

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

Here again, I think Paul has mainly in mind the history of the pagan lands as viewed through Jewish eyes.

 In addition to idolatry, the impure eating habits and sexual habits of the pagans were particularly offensive to Jews.

And ordinarily all of these things were connected--- i.e. idol worship, eating of food sacrificed to idols, temple prostitution, and the like.

The whole pagan cult was viewed as an abomination contrary to the worship of the True and Living God in obedience to his Laws and Statutes.

God gave them up to all of this, as Paul has previously said,

(Verse 25)

because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

That sounds very Jewish, very old Testament, and it is meant to.

Paul is contrasting the righteous worship of the invisible Creator God (Israel at her best) with the horrible mess of despicable wickedness that always seemed to surround pagan idol worship.

These perverse religious practices, Paul seems to say, led to sexual desires and practices which were dishonorable and contrary to nature, and which God permitted the pagans to pursue.

Sin --- that which is contrary to the will of God --- is very often its own punishment.

(Verse 26)

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;

This was not just the women. Verse 27 reads:

(Verse 27)

and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Here clearly Paul speaks of male homosexuality, which was pretty common among the Greek speaking upper classes of that era, and rarely viewed among them as a sin or a perversion.

But Paul views it as unnatural and sinful and, in itself, the punishment for engaging in it.

Most important, here I think, is that Paul sees such physical perversion, things contrary to the created, natural, order established by the invisible God, as being outward manifestations of the inward spiritual perversion of the heart of man.

Questions?

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 1, Verses 28 -32

Will someone please read verses 28 -32 in Japanese.

Thank you. Now will someone please read those same verses in English.

28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,

30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

32 Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Thank you.

Among the gentile Christians in Rome who are reading this letter, I suppose that few were raised to view the religious practices of Rome or homosexuality as being perverse and uncivilized.

On the contrary, and unlike their Jewish brothers, many of the gentiles in Rome would have grown up regarding such things as normal, or at least acceptable, civilized, and even rather refined!

In that way their situation is not so much different from ours.

In Japan certainly many kinds of idol worship are considered to be a normal part of the culture and in much of the world today, and even in much of the Christian Church, homosexuality is likewise seen as acceptable.

I grew up in this society too and many of these things seem normal to me also, however I can not get around the fact that the Apostle Paul is saying that such things are evidence of how far man is fallen.

Verse 28 reads:

(Verse 28)

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

Throughout the broad sweep of history, humanity has not seen fit to acknowledge God, and this explains why our mind is debased.

We perversely wish to do what we [still somehow] know ought not to be done.

That is what human beings are, including you and me.

Verses 29 - 31 give a long list of how we all are:

We are:

(Verse 29 - 31)

[They were] filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

[They are] full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness,

**[They are } gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful,
inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,
foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.**

Does anyone doubt that Paul has provided a fair description of humanity?

Does anyone NOT see themselves described here?

We are all this way. We all deserve to die. In fact, everything would be better if we did die.

There is just no point in continuing to preserve this humanity which Paul accurately describes.

Verse 32 reads:

(Verse 32)

Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Anyone who does not know that human behavior deserves death, may be beyond hope!

At least know that! At least know how completely wicked and depraved we actually are.

And we are not speaking here of what the Jews knew far more clearly through their scripture.

We are speaking about what every human being with the smallest spark left in them must

know:

That because of what we do, we deserve to die.

And yet knowing this, we do these things anyway.

And not only that, we make these despicable things, which deserve only death, into positive virtues.

We actually applaud, and encourage, and even teach others to do these unspeakable things.

We who were created in God's image, despite what we know, through the choices that we (in some sense) freely make, succeed almost in becoming Satan himself.

We at least succeed in becoming fit only to spend an eternity in Hell.

That is our situation. All of us.

We have no excuse ---which is what we read in the first verse of Chapter 2

Therefore we all need a savior, which is the point Paul is working toward.

Closing Prayer