THE RIGHTEOUS WILL LIVE BY FAITH

Romans 1:8-17
Key Verse 17

“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 the last passage, we studied Paul’s personal testimony and greetings to the church at Rome. May God bless us to believe as Paul did that we have been set apart for the gospel in this generation. In today’s passage, Paul reveals his eager prayer to preach the gospel at Rome. In particular, Paul expresses his sincerest heart’s desire to be a source of blessing to all men as a servant of the gospel. Finally, Paul summarizes the reasons why he is so intent on sharing the gospel. Perhaps many times we have been asked to summarize why we want to do something or have something, from Elementary School up through our job interviews. 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 in this sinsick and adulterous generation.

I. Pray at all times

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 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 never failed first to pray, and then to act.

First, Paul prayed with a thankful spirit. At first glance, 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. Imagine that you came home from work and your husband or wife asked you, “How did it go today, honey?” and you had experienced the sufferings and trials that Paul had. Would you have at that time a thankful mind? 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, crucifying his passions and pride in prayer before God, 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 thanked God that he could be faithful in prayer for them. He even thanked God that after many disappointments, the way seemed to be opening up for him to come to Rome. As we know, his plans were again thwarted when he was arrested in Jerusalem for desecrating the temple. And yet, Paul was so thankful to God that he could accept God’s will for him to go to Rome in chains as a political prisoner. From the very beginning of time, Satan’s most powerful weapon against the servants of God has been to rob them of a thankful mind to God. On the other hand, God’s sincerest prayer for his people is to be thankful for his grace. Those who maintain a thankful mind toward God and for his holy calling are those who can live by faith.

Second, Paul prayed with a mind for mission. Paul’s prayer for the Romans was pointed. He had one clear prayer topic for them: that the way might be opened for him to come to them as a gospel messenger. Here we see Paul’s spirit to move mountains through prayer. Jesus’ disciples were once startled to see that a fig tree Jesus had cursed withered overnight. Then 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 will be yours” (Mark 11:22-24). Many people, upon hearing this precious promise of Jesus, immediately pray according to the desires of their sinful mind, and are rebuffed. Then they cast doubt on the promise of God. But Paul depended on this promise of God absolutely, and prayed with absolute faith that God would move mountains for the sake of his world salvation purpose in answer to his prayers. This is the faith that enabled Paul to pray continually with the prayer topic to preach the gospel at Rome. As we have already recalled, God answered this prayer, sending Paul to Rome in chains. But Paul was not unhappy. He confessed, “When I am weak, then I am strong in his grace.” Mission-centered prayer makes us strong in doing the work of God. Mission-centered prayer is prayer that will be answered. 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, when we pray with a mind to accomplish the world mission work.

II. A righteous man (11-15)

St. Paul was already famous and widely known as a righteous man in Christian circles by the time he wrote this letter, just prior to his visit to Jerusalem and arrest by the Jews. So, Paul might have expected that the Roman Christians would eagerly anticipate his visit, and prepare a lavish round of feasts! In short, Paul could have expected and anticipated that he would be served. 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 by bringing them spiritual gifts and encouraging them through his faith. Indeed, Paul’s heart’s desire was to be a blessing to the whole world, in obedience to Jesus’ command: “this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings...” (Ac. 9:15). 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? If we are to judge by his letter to the Romans, it is the gospel. Paul wanted to reap a harvest among the Gentiles in Rome by preaching the gospel, just as God had enabled him to do so throughout Asia and Greece. Paul was not trying to earn salvation from God. Rather, 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 preached the gospel where it had not yet been preached out of a sense of obligation and duty. Why was Paul so indebted to God and to men? It was because Paul and Paul's people had failed to live up to God’s high calling for them as God’s chosen people. It was because God by his mercy and grace had extended God's high calling and purpose to all those who believed in the gospel of his Son.

Paul had done his best according to his own understanding to live a successful and victorious life. But instead of being a blessing to others, he had become a murderer, a dangerous man whom no one could trust or honor, except with lip service. When he stood by as the crowd rushed Stephen to stone him to death, Paul felt that he had become a kind of great man, until 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 deny the fact that his soul was dying by acting ever more outrageously against the gospel and Jesus’ 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. From that time on, Paul preached the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus as the Christ to Jews and Gentiles alike. He bore every kind of suffering and hardship
in doing so, because of the matchless grace he had received in Jesus. Though he had been a proud and nationalistic Jew, he humbled himself to serve the Gentiles and their kings, not grudgingly, but 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. And even though he had since become a great man in Christ, he continued to labor in Christ with a sense of privilege that such a wretched sinner was now given the grace to reap harvests of blessings among men. Paul was truly a righteous man of God. But his righteousness was that of a debtor before God and men; one who knows that he can never repay the grace and mercy he has received.

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

As we have studied up until now, Paul’s life had been completely changed when he repented and believed the gospel of God regarding his Son, Jesus Christ. He was changed from a bitter, nationalistic and violent man into a prayerful, thankful, powerful man who was a source of blessing for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. For this reason, Paul considered the gospel to be the most precious gift of God, which he was eager to impart to anyone and everyone who was willing to hear it. Every Christian must thank God that he did it so thoroughly in this letter to the Romans. But before laying out in detail the full meaning of the gospel, 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.’” Paul suffered so much in order to preach the gospel that worldly people concluded: “he is to be pitied more than all men.” He lost all his worldly privileges as a member of the Jewish elite and as a citizen of Tarsus and of Rome. But Paul said simply, “Don’t feel sorry for me. What I lost was garbage (Php 3:5-8). What I have gained is the power of God to bring eternal life to God’s sheep. What I have gained is a righteousness from God that is mine by faith. With this gospel, I can
be a blessing to the whole world. Thank God and praise Jesus.” Let's think briefly about Paul's summary of the gospel's meaning.

First, in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed. Many people understand righteousness in many ways. For example, some people would consider that righteousness is not eating cows. Some might say that righteousness is wearing a long beard, while others would say not. But this is all self-righteousness. It is righteousness that is no righteousness at all, for it is has as its standard human activity, which is by nature changeable and corrupt. It is sinful man's attempt to exalt himself before God and before men by drawing a favorable contrast between himself and other sinners. The Jews of course claimed that they had in the law of Moses a righteousness from God. The law is good, because it reveals God's standard of righteousness and exposes man's sin. The Jews took great pride in that they were the ones who had received the Law of God through Moses. But the righteousness found in the law is like an ocean of salt water to a thirsty man. For whoever depends on the law for righteousness will be condemned when he breaks the law. This realization has become the fountain of despair for the post-Christian era, and the motivation for the practice of psychiatry. How can sinful men be made righteous? Human beings need to be righteous before their Creator God. Human beings yearn to get out from under the judgment and condemnation they know their sinful deeds deserve. But their sinful nature makes them too fearful and too weak to face up to God's righteous standard. What an odd predicament we human beings find ourselves in: What we most need is what we are most afraid of—righteousness.

But in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed. In saying this, Paul is not declaring that the gospel is a different, better standard of righteousness than that proclaimed in the law. Instead, the gospel is the fulfillment of God's promise to write God's 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.” The problem of the old covenant is that
what was written down on paper was not written onto human hearts. The grace of the new covenant is that by faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, sinful hearts can be restored in the original image of their Creator God. What we could not do, God did for us through sending his Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross as the Lamb of God. 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. It is not a righteousness that condemns; it is a righteousness that saves by lifting us up on wings of grace until we can meet the righteous standard of God's truth. It is a righteousness that is wholly from God, and wholly sufficient for man. It is a righteousness that took the enemy of God, Saul, and declared him to be Paul, the servant of Christ Jesus and set apart for the gospel of God. It is a righteousness that 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.

Second, a righteousness that is by faith. The testimony of the Scriptures is that righteousness before God is by faith in the name of Jesus Christ, and that this righteousness is for all who believe. And once we have repented and believed, what should we do? Keep on believing. Look at verse 17b. “...a righteousness that is by faith, from first to last.” Our struggle to live by faith is the struggle to keep believing in God’s righteousness for us through Christ Jesus in the face of our past and future sins, in the face of all the enemies arrayed against us in the heavens above and on the earth below. Our goal is faith, and our victory is faith, and it is all faith in between. 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 live by faith through thankful prayer. May God bless us to practice the righteousness from God by faith.