

“Not Ashamed of the Gospel”  
Romans 1:16–17  
Dr. Stafford Carson  
October 29, 2023 • Sunday Morning Sermon

It's an absolute joy and honor for my wife, Patricia and I to be with you at Briarwood Presbyterian Church today on Reformation Sunday as you have remembered, those who have passed away recently, not least, our dear friend and brother Harry Reeder. Harry was a real counselor, helper, and mentor to me and has contributed so much to the ministry of Westminster Seminary. His ministry also stretched across the Atlantic, as you know, to Ireland and many of my colleagues within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland benefited enormously from the Embers to a Flame curriculum and the way in which he inspired and helps our ministers to remain true and faithful to the Gospel as they seek the revitalization of their churches. We give thanks today from our hearts for every memory we have of our dear brother.

I don't think Harry would want it to be excessively solemn because he and I shared the Ulster Scots stories and yarns, and one of the favorite ones was of the Irish preacher who was tempted to preach a bit too long. While he was preaching, a person in the congregation got up and was walking out and the preacher stopped and said, “Excuse me, sir, but where are you going?” The person said ‘I'm going for a haircut.’ The preacher said, “Why did you not get a haircut before you came?” He said, ‘I didn't need one before I came.’ Those were the kind of yarns and quacks that Harry enjoyed, and they'll be shared together.

Our Scripture reading today is from the Book of Romans, which is a key text on Reformation Sunday. Romans 1:11-17 says *[11] For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— [12] that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. [13] I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. [14] I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. [15] So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.*

*[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.” Amen.*

On the 31st of October 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg in Germany. He knew that everybody would be coming the next day, All Saints Day, to church, and they would see what he had posted there. They wanted to set out the issues that he believed needed to be addressed by the church authorities. It was his way of initiating an important conversation and an important debate with regard to the Gospel and how men, women, boys and girls could be right with God. So traditionally, as you know, reformed Christians have remembered this event on the Sunday closest to October 31st each year.

Perhaps some of you reading this today are thinking, ‘why doesn't this event that happened in Germany over 500 years ago need to be remembered or need to be celebrated here in the United States today? What's the continuing relevance of Martin Luther, his 95 theses and the whole Protestant Reformation?’ There's a sense in which this church here has been built on the reason that began with Luther's actions back then, because what happened back then was that Luther was seeking to restore a true and a Biblical understanding of the Gospel. If we are going to be confident in the Gospel today, if we are going to be clear in preaching it and in presenting it

to others, then we do well to remember and reflect on what Luther said and Luther wrote. What I'm saying to you today is not something new for most in the reformed church know this very well, but I think it's important on this day that we're reminded of these basic truths and the key passage in Luther's understanding of the Gospel comes from this passage in Romans 1.

The book of Romans is all about the Gospel and in our contemporary world, more than anything else, we need to be confident in and we need to be clear about that Gospel. Up until 2020, I was principal of Union Theological College in Belfast, the denominational college for the training of ministers for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. My task there was to train and to equip ministers so that they could work for the advancement of the Gospel all across the island of Ireland. I retired from that position and Westminster Seminary asked me to come and help them with their global ministries department, and we continue to try to advance the Gospel across the world in programs of theological education in Korean, in Mandarin, in Arabic and in Spanish. Our goal for these students is that they, too, would be confident and clear in their commitment to the Gospel in an increasingly complex and confusing world. We believe this is a critical task not only for people in the Far East, not just for people in the Middle East, not just for those in Latin America, but for those of us who live in the West. There are strong and powerful forces at work in our own culture that are seeking to undermine our traditional values and which pressurize us to preach a different gospel, another gospel, a gospel that can only bring destruction.

So, I want to give two very simple points today – we need to be confident in the Gospel and we need to be clear about the Gospel. Whatever way you look at it, Paul's Letter to Rome is one of the highest mountain peaks in all of Scripture. Martin Luther called it the clearest Gospel of all. “If a man understands it,” said John Calvin, “he has a sure road open for him to the understanding of the whole of Scripture.” William Tyndale, in his preface to the Book of Romans, called Romans the principal and most excellent part of the New Testament, the most pure gospel, a light and a way in unto the whole scripture. And of course, the Apostle Paul was passionate about the Gospel for it was the driving force of his ministry.

In the very first verse of this book Paul says in Romans 1:1, *[1] Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God.* Then he immediately goes on to define that Gospel in Romans 1:2-3 by saying the Gospel is all about Jesus Christ promised by the prophets and now, because of His resurrection from the dead, He's declared to be the Son of God with par – that fact alone has massive implications for you and me personally, and for the future of this world. The climax of this opening section of the letter comes Romans 1:16-17 which says *[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.”* By saying that he's not ashamed of the Gospel, Paul really means that the glories in the Gospel. He's proud of the Gospel. He boasts in it.

Perhaps you're thinking right now, ‘Then why did he not say that he boasts in it? Why did he put it in a negative form?’ It's a bit like the difference between asking an American and an Irishman how they are. If you ask an American how he is, he'll say, ‘I'm good. I'm doing just fine.’ Ask an Irishman how he's doing, and he'll say, ‘Well, I'm not bad but I mustn't grumble,’ because he overstates his condition negatively. Not that Paul was an Irishman, but I think he put it in this way for the simple reason that he wanted to help these Christians in Rome. From what Paul knew about them, some of them were tempted to be ashamed of the Gospel. Do you remember how Timothy was like that? Paul wrote to him and said, “Don't be ashamed to testify

about our Lord or to ashamed of me, his prisoner” (II Timothy 1:8). There were people in Rome who were just like that. In order to strengthen them, fortify them and deliver them from that fear, Paul puts it like this.

James Stewart of Edinburgh, in a sermon on this text, made the perceptive comment that there is no sense in declaring that you are not ashamed of something unless you've been tempted to feel ashamed of it. Without doubt, Paul felt this temptation. I think it's a temptation that we all feel at one time or another. We know that if we really share the Gospel boldly and openly, we run the risk of being ridiculed and criticized or even made to feel foolish if we really stand up for the Gospel. We may have friends or work colleagues or even members of our own family who are not Christians and while we find it easy to talk to them about almost everything else in every other area of their lives, we can become strangely tongue tied when it comes to speaking about Christ and the Christian faith. We're afraid that they might think less of us or they might even criticize us or ridicule us if we say too much. You know how it is in our 'woke' culture. We may be in danger of getting into hot water if we express our commitment to the Gospel or to Christian values.

Primarily, of course, the Gospel is ridiculed because of its message. We talk about a Person who was born in abject poverty, who worked as a carpenter. We speak of Someone who was crucified in apparent weakness on a cross after having made extravagant claims about Himself, and while He suffers and dies a mob jeers Him saying “He says He saves other, well, let Him see Himself if He be the Christ.” People scoff at that because we say that such a Person is the Savior of the world and the Son of God, the very character of the Christian message tends to produce a negative reaction.

To put it another way, we say the Gospel isn't a philosophy, it's a statement of fact. People never criticize philosophy because it appears to be so learned, so wonderful. You can compare and contrast and debate the rival viewpoints but the Gospel is not fundamentally a great philosophical argument. It's the account of the life, the death, the resurrection of a Person. It just doesn't follow the methods of philosophy. When Paul first visited Athens, the Stoics and the Epicureans listened to him at first but then he began to speak about Jesus and the resurrection, and the meeting broke up. ‘This isn't philosophy at all,’ they said. ‘It's folly. It's nonsense. He's just talking about some Person.’

Paul knows something about what's going on in Rome, because here's Rome, the mistress of the world, the imperial city, the seat of government and power. And in the midst of the pomp and the ceremonial of the Roman emperors and the Roman court, there are these people who call themselves Christians, people who said that the Savior of the world was a carpenter from Nazareth. Paul likens the laughter and the ridicule. ‘Have you heard the latest joke’ they would say. ‘A carpenter from Nazareth was the Son of God. His followers are claiming He rose again from the dead. How crazy is that? That He saved the world by being crucified? How absolutely ridiculous. Isn't it also funny and so amusing? Imagine anybody thinking like that.’ In the sophisticated and learned circles of Rome, the response was negative to say the least.

Paul himself felt the force of that kind of ridicule for he used to be an evil, intelligent man. It wasn't easy for him to endure the sarcasm and the scorn. That's why in the first three chapters of I Corinthians, he expresses how he felt that criticism very strongly. I Corinthians 1:20-25 says [20] *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?* [21] *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.* [22] *For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,* [23] *but*

*we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, [24] but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. [25] For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

Because the Gospel doesn't attach great significance to human man centered wisdom, people continue to criticize it, continue to ridicule it. There's really no place for intellectual pride when it comes to the Gospel and in face of all the complex arguments, philosophies and theories of this world, the Gospel simply points us to Jesus Christ. You can imagine some people are just embarrassed and ashamed of that kind of message.

We can also be ashamed of the gospel because it undermines all human effort at making oneself right with God. The Gospel tells you from the very beginning, try and work as you might it's not going to make any difference to you spiritually. All your own righteousness, all your own best efforts, all your own great performance is just like filthy rags. All your best works are of no use to you and people don't like to hear that. They don't like to be told that they can't make it on their own because it undermines their pride and their high view of their own abilities. With our natural pride and what we think we can do; you can imagine that people find the Gospel offensive.

So how do we overcome this temptation to be ashamed of the Gospel? Paul tells us it's by remembering that the very same message which some people despise for its weakness, is, in fact, the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. We can be confident because in the Gospel there is a dynamic at work – a dynamite that can be totally explosive. We have experienced that part in our own lives, in that God has reconciled us to Himself. He has forgiven us our sins. He has made us His children. He has put His Spirit within us. He has begun to change and transform our lives. He has introduced us into a new community of faith and love. How could we possibly be ashamed of the Gospel? The wonderful Good News, is that all across the world and here at Briarwood, you have been so confident in the Gospel. You had two pastors who were and are men who have been so committed to the Gospel and its power but the good news is that Briarwood is doing well as you if we remain faithful to the Gospel. Yet across the world, there are many others who are similarly being confident and clear about the Gospel.

I participated in a conference in Hong Kong just last week. Over 500 Chinese pastors and church leaders came together, and it was so thrilling to see these Chinese believers who longed to be trained so that they may be better equipped to share the Gospel effectively in their very challenging and rather hostile circumstances, because they believe and they see it happening in their situation, that the Gospel is the part of God for the salvation of those who believe. They have seen its impact in so many lives and they have such enormous confidence in the Gospel because it's for everyone who believes – there's no discrimination, there's no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Whatever your nationality, whatever your ethnicity, whatever your intellectual capabilities, whatever your economic situation, the Gospel is Good News for you and we can share that message with confidence and with boldness, because the Gospel is the power of God.

Secondly, we need to be clear about that Gospel. The central goal of our work at Westminster Seminary is to prepare specialists in the Bible who can proclaim the whole counsel of God for Christ and His global Church. The problem is that in many regions of this world, people are not clear about the whole counsel of God, nor are they clear about the Gospel. They don't grasp how the Gospel fits into the great drama of Scripture, how it exalts Jesus Christ. In the 1040 window, only around 85% of the pastors have any kind of theological education. The churches are often weak. They're often confused about the Gospel and we have to say that

increasingly in the West there is confusion and ignorance about what constitutes the Gospel as well. Many preachers and teachers have lost confidence in the Biblical Gospel. They have substituted other alternatives rather than the pure Word of God and the Gospel is often diluted. It's often twisted. It's often adulterated. So, we need to be clear about what the Gospel saying as well as confident.

Here in Romans 1:17 is the clarity we need as it says [17] *For in it (Gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."* It is a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it's written, 'the righteous will live by faith.' Martin Luther said that he really struggled with this verse and what it said about the righteousness of God. Luther wrote, "I labored diligently and anxiously as to how to understand Paul's words in Romans 1:17, where he says that the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel. I sought long not anxiously, but the expression, the righteousness of God blocked away.' When Luther began his studies, he made the mistake of thinking that the righteousness of God simply described God's character, God's being. He thought that it only referred to God's attribute of righteousness. He thought that it meant that in the Old Testament there was a revelation of the righteousness of God in the moral law and in the Ten Commandments, but that in Christ you get a fuller picture of God's righteousness. Luther said, "I saw it. I wish that God had not made the Gospel known because this fuller revelation of the righteousness of God seemed to make me feel utterly hopeless and helpless. I didn't know what to do with myself."

Luther said the righteousness of God blocked the way and you can understand it if the Gospel only reveals the righteousness or the holiness of God, if it only reveals the character of God, then far from being Good News, it could actually be terrifying and alarming. The Gospel would be saying that we've got to work harder. We've got to try harder. We've got to please God so that somehow or other our righteousness begins to satisfy God's standards. It would mean that we'd have to make ourselves acceptable to God by becoming like Him but Paul's point here is that the righteousness of God revealed in the Gospel is a divine achievement as well as a divine attribute.

The NIV translation reflects that understanding for rather than saying 'in the Gospel of righteousness of God is revealed,' it says 'in the Gospel of righteousness *from* God is revealed.' You see, the righteousness that we create, that we try to manufacture for ourselves will never be adequate to acquit us in God's holy presence. We need a righteousness that comes from God and God by the power of the Gospel so works in us that His righteousness becomes ours. God and the Gospel gives to us and does for us what we could never do for ourselves. The Gospel brings to us the righteousness of God and we need to be clear about it.

What's the Gospel meant to do? What is it supposed to achieve? Is the Gospel just about forgiveness and delivering me from hell? Is the Gospel just designed to make me happy and take away my worries and my problems? Thank God it does that but that's not the central purpose of salvation. The end, the object, the purpose of the Gospel is to make us fit to stand in the presence of God. It is to make us righteous in the sight of God and unless we have something or someone that will enable us to do that night and in the day of judgment, we have no hope. So how can I be righteous in God's sight? Before God can pronounce me righteous and just, I must have kept the law. I must have honored it in every respect. How can I do that? I'm a sinner. No matter how hard I try, I just keep falling and failing and the answer to the dilemma is the whole glory of the Gospel.

Those of you who attend Briarwood know how that happens for you have had it explained to you from this pulpit for many years. The Lord Jesus Christ satisfied the law of God

in every sense, and He is the perfectly righteous One. He was made under the law. He rendered a perfect obedience to the law and in His death upon the cross, He took the guilt and the penalty meted out by the law upon all our sin. He took the place of lawbreakers like you and me on the cross and He honored the law completely. He honored it positively and negatively, actively and passively by His life and in His death. When we believe in Jesus, we are united by faith to Him, all that He is becomes ours. The Gospel gives to us who believe the very righteousness of God as our own. When we believe in Jesus, He cancels the death of sin on one side, and He credits to our account the perfect righteousness of Christ and the other – all the perfection of Christ, all the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ becomes ours, so that when we stand in the presence of God, robed and clothed with all that God gives us, it means that when God looks at us, He actually sees Jesus. That's what Paul means when he says, 'For in the Gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed.' The righteousness of God is ours in and through Jesus, our blessed Savior.

In a sermon on this passage, Professor John Murray makes a very interesting point when he says, "The righteousness of Christ is not simply something that grinds our justification, but it's something that demands our justification. The righteousness of Christ cannot meet with anything other than God's approval and God's approbation, no matter how depraved or degraded we may be as sinners, for when we are united to Christ, God must declare us justified because the righteousness of Christ is undefiled and undefinable. It's the righteousness that reaches us in the deepest depths of our sin and raises us to the highest heights of Divine approval." It's a righteousness that covers us and transforms our status completely and entirely. It is the power of God for salvation. If I can summarize in one word all that I've been saying about the righteousness of God, then it's simply this; the righteousness of God is Jesus Christ. God has given us Jesus. We're united by faith to Him and in Him we have all that we need. The problem of bringing together a righteous and holy God and a sinful guilty person is resolved in Jesus Christ, who is our righteousness and that's why the Reformers said that salvation was in Christ alone. All that we need in terms of righteousness is given to us in Christ.

Now the key question is how do we get Christ? How does that righteousness become our righteousness. Paul tells us the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. Paul goes on to explain it; a righteousness that is by faith, from first to last, just as it's written, the righteous will live by faith. Our great reformation slogan says salvation is by faith alone but during the Reformation, as in our day, people often characterized faith as a casual acceptance of the truth. But the reformers were very careful to describe the essential components of saving faith. Faith has an object and it's Jesus Christ. But knowing a body of content about Jesus is not enough. We must affirm the truth of that content and there are millions of people in our world who know something about Christianity, but they don't believe that it's true. Saving faith requires the conviction that the facts about Jesus Christ are true. But knowing the facts and believing them to be true are not enough in themselves to make us Christians. The devils and the demons know the truth of what God has said, but they don't trust him. Rather, we must entrust ourselves into the hands of Jesus Christ who is the living truth.

Faith is, as the Westminster Confession says, accepting, receiving, and resting on Christ alone. Faith points us away from ourselves to Jesus Christ who meets all our needs and when you think about it for a moment, when we understand who Christ is, that He's the only One who stands between us and our condemnation, that He's the only One who can save us from the Holy wrath of God, then you can understand that He is just everything to us. So, we commit ourselves to Him. We entrust our lives to Him. We rest in Him alone and entirely for ourselves. If you're

not yet a Christian believer, then that's the call of the Gospel to you today. Stop trusting in yourself. Stop trying to work your own salvation. Stop trying to curry the favor of the Almighty, thinking that somehow or another you'll be able to be your own savior. Stop trusting in yourself and look to Christ and trust exclusively and entirely in Him.

Of course, what justifies and saves us is not our faith. It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. If somebody gives you an enormous and expensive gift and you're telling other people about it, you don't tell them what a great person you are because you took the gift and because you received it. The fact that you took and received it was incidental. The important thing was the gift that they should offer it to you, that they should give it to you. That's what's great and wonderful, not your response. Their kindness and their generosity is the focal point and so it is in salvation. We don't glory in our faith, but we glory in the righteousness of God which has become ours by faith. It's by faith from first to last.

What a wonderful statement that is there as Paul makes it, 'the righteous shall live by faith' amid why Martin Luther leaped for joy when he read that quotation from Habakkuk. The light dawned. 'There is such a thing as a righteous or a just person,' Luther said. It's all a matter of faith. How can I be righteous? It's a righteousness which God gives to faith and Luther's life, his outlook was revolutionized. Luther says, "When I saw the difference, that law is one thing and Gospel another, I broke through. Outside, formally, he uttered the expression 'the righteousness of God' and I began to regard it as my dearest and most comforting word so that this expression of Paul's became to me in very truth, a gift of paradise." What a revelation and what a transformation from a miserable, unhappy monk counting his beads, fasting, sweating, praying, being more and more conscious of his failure, to being a herald of the Reformation and a picture of the Gospel. And it all came through understanding Romans 1:17, 'The righteous will live by faith.'

Paul says, 'This is my message. This is what the Gospel reveals...' and that's what is revealed clearly in all its fullness as we share the Gospel today. That's why Paul says, 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel' because he knows it is the part of God to all who believe and this is the great truth that has been sounding out from this pulpit for so many years. It's the great truth that we affirm, again on this Reformation Sunday that this Christian life is a life of faith – faith from first to last. We walk by faith, not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7). We don't just exercise faith once at the beginning of the Christian life, but all the way through the Christian life. We continue to look to Christ rather than our own performance.

Some of you are thinking, 'Well, if the Christian life is a life of faith, then my faith is very weak. How do I know I will survive as a Christian? Can my faith ever feel?' Listen, it's not the amount of your faith that's important. It's the Object of your faith that matters and if your faith, however small and weak, is focused on Christ, you'll never feel. Christ as the Author and Finisher of our faith. Our confession of faith says that while faith may be assailed or weakened, it always gets the victory. The reason why it always gets the victory is because it's focused on Christ alone. He is our hope. He is our salvation. He is our righteousness. In Christ alone my hope is found. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, we give You thanks that on this Reformation day we can be reminded of the simple and clear truths of the Gospel – that all that we need is found in Jesus Christ and in faith we look to Him so that all that He is becomes ours and we stand fully and accepted and embraced by You.

Thank You, Lord, for the truth of the Gospel, and thank You for this wonderful message that we can share with the whole world to everyone who believes, Amen.