

I am Not Ashamed

Romans 1:16

March 4, 2018
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Have you heard President Kennedy's inauguration speech? If you remember any line, what do you remember? "*Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.*" Remember the movie *Field of Dreams*? One line stands out, "*Is this heaven?*" "*No, it's Iowa.*" Winston Churchill's speech to the House of Commons in 1940 had a line that stood out, "*We shall never surrender!*" You get the idea. Great speeches and books and movies have a line that lingers. Often, this is a summary of everything the author wants to say. A thesis. A cliff note. A snippet of all that is to follow.

This letter from Paul to the church at Rome has its Churchill moment. A personal, memorable, inspiring summary of all that Paul is going to say. He is going to say it deeply and eloquently throughout 16 chapters, but the essence of all of Romans is in 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 for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" (Romans 1:16–17 ESV)

Our focus today is on verse 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.*" Paul begins with a personal statement regarding his own confidence in the gospel. "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel.*"

The general term for what he does here is a double negative. A double negative is a mathematical term. Two negatives make a positive. In conversation we may say, *I am not unsure about this*. Not unsure. We have to think. Not. Not. That really means I am really sure. He could have said, *I am confident in the gospel*.

What Paul is doing here is deeper than merely a double negative. I learned a new word this week: *Litotes* = *Ironic understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of its contrary.* (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*) Is that helpful? You may not know *litotes* but I guarantee you use them. You may say, "You should check out such and such a restaurant. You won't be sorry." You won't be sorry. What we mean is that you'll be glad you went to the restaurant, but by affirming the negative, it actually says it more strongly. Or here's another, "Not bad." It's a double negative, but by doing that it emphasizes the positive in a stronger way.

Why this detail? Because Paul could have said, *I'm confident in the gospel of God*. Great statement. But what does he actually say? "*I am not ashamed of the gospel.*" He exacerbates shame in the gospel to emphasize absolute confidence in the gospel. He exacerbates shame in Jesus in order to emphasize joy in Jesus. *I have zero, zip, nada shame about the gospel. None.* That is to say, *I have absolute boldness, courage, and confidence in the gospel*.

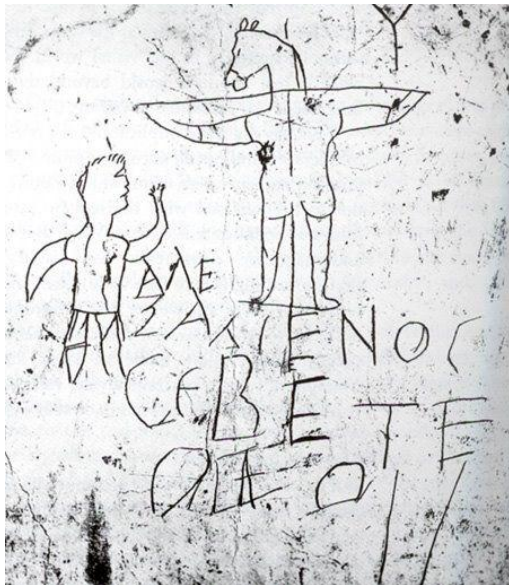
Speaking of shame, do you feel some over your Christianity? Let's be honest, very few of us could make this statement absolutely. As brave as we are in church, our culture is non-receptive and generally antagonistic to the actual gospel. If you want to know what gospel

Paul is referring to, see how he starts it in two verses. "For the wrath of God..." (Romans 1:18) How does that go over in our culture?

So Paul isn't saying he has no shame in a watered down version of the gospel. He has no shame in the raw and explicit gospel and all that it says about sin, God, wrath, judgment, Jesus, cross, blood, death, supernatural resurrection from the dead, and life eternal for only those who believe in Jesus. None of that in Rome would be well-received. Legally it was the judgment of a Roman governor to kill Jesus and now Paul is going to Rome to convince the Romans that one who Rome called a criminal is actually God in the flesh and Savior of the world?

Further, Rome's whole religious and political system was at odds with the basic tenets of Christian truth. Romans were polytheists. They had many gods and many sons of gods in their pantheon. Rome was very sensitive to claims of kingship. Remember Pilate's question of Jesus, "So you are a king?" (John 18:37) He didn't ask if he was a carpenter. Kings were threats to the Roman order and authority. After the wise men's visit, King Herod, a Roman appointee, was so concerned, he sent his soldiers to kill every child under two years old in the whole region of Bethlehem. Religiously hostile. Politically hostile. And personally hostile.

Christianity is a message of moral accountability to God which required personal repentance from sins viewed as normal in Roman life, especially sexual sin. Read the accounts of life in Rome or Pompeii—these cities' sexual activity would make Las Vegas blush.



Alexamenos Graffito – This is early millennium graffiti found etched in plaster near the Palatine hill in Rome; near the coliseum and the palaces of the Caesars. He depicts a donkey on a cross and the Greek inscription approximately translates to, "Alexamenos worships [his] god." This was mockery of Alexamenos for believing such a thing and mockery of Christ on the cross. It is dated to around 200 A.D. If there was ever a city in all of world history with political, religious, and personal hostility to the gospel, it was Rome. Paul realized all of this, yet he says, "I am not ashamed."

What's the hostility level in your family, school, gym, neighborhood, or workplace? Feel like you are living in a modern Rome? Working for Nero? Ever feel like Alexamenos? Every

Christian does at times, myself included. So, Paul, tell us, where does this boldness even facing down Rome, come from?

The Potency of the Gospel – The Power of God

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, FOR." Here is the why. *"It is the power of God for salvation."* (Romans 1:16)

Paul realized it wasn't his gospel or any human being's gospel. He didn't preach Paul's gospel or Peter's gospel or John's gospel or the Jews' gospel or the Gentiles' gospel. What would be the point? There is no forgiveness of sins in Paul's name or Peter's name or John's name or your name or my name. Our gospels and all our self-help gurus and doctors and health experts and psychologists, and all the medical knowledge of the whole world can't save us from death much less the wrath and judgment from God. No. We need power to save that we don't have.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God." The gospel is the power of God. The Greek word there for power is *dunamis*. If you've studied this, you know we get our word *dynamite* from it. However, while dynamite blows things up, the gospel powerfully puts us back together. It is power to save, reconcile, heal, and forgive.

Its central truths are God's activity on our behalf through Christ. Its saving work in the human heart is generated from God, not us. Its application of saving benefits is God's work, not ours. Its eternal application is an ongoing, promise-fulfilling work of God. We live forever by the power of God. From start to finish, salvation is by the promise and power of God. The gospel is God's gospel, not ours. We should be glad that anything from a human is marked by weakness and frailty and subject to the whims of culture and change. Humans are all fads and latest-and-greatest but nothing from us endures.

But the gospel is God's gospel and is empowered by God's power. Paul's point is, *why would I be ashamed of the gospel if it's God's power on display in saving us?*

As I was preparing this message, Vladimir Putin of Russia came out and bragged that he now has a nuclear weapon more powerful than any other in the world. He didn't say, "I am ashamed to have to admit something, I now have the most powerful weapon in the world." No. Power empowers. Power emboldens. And the greatest power in the world is the supernatural work of God through the gospel transforming sinners from objects of wrath to objects of mercy forgiven forever by a Holy God. The only reason that doesn't astonish us is that we don't realize what we have.

Why should we not be ashamed of the gospel? God. It's God's gospel and God's power.

The Purpose of the Gospel – Salvation

"...for salvation..."

How God accomplishes this is what we'll be seeing in 16 chapters of Romans. But don't miss the why. God is expressing his power through the gospel to save. Save? Save from what? If you asked the average person, "Are you saved?" They would likely ask back, *the question confuses me, saved from what?*

Paul is about to explain this in two verses. *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."* (Romans 1:18)

What we are saved from is the wrath of God. Who we are saved from is God. *Wait, so if I understand this, you are saying that God sends his power through the gospel to save us from himself?* That mystery is what Romans will unpack and you're going to have to keep coming and coming and coming for that mystery to open like the most beautiful flower you have ever seen.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation—Saving sinners from *his own wrath* at our sin by Jesus becoming sin for us and then taking the penalty of sin via the cross.

The Condition of the Gospel – For All Who Believe

"...to everyone who believes..."

If the verse stopped at "all" it would be universalism. Salvation from God's judgment and wrath is not universal. There is a condition. *Believe*. To believe in something is to trust in something. Belief in our culture insinuates an irrational hope in something or somebody.

Christian faith is the opposite of that. It is a settled trust and confidence in the promise of the gospel, that all who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord will be saved from the wrath of God and saved to life eternal. Our belief doesn't make it true like Disney movies suggest. It is true and powerful to save whether we believe it or not.

Our trust is the condition required for salvation to be applied to us. In this series, we are going to get into how that trust and faith is also a gift from God so that nobody can boast about it. But the universal offer is real and so is the condition. We must believe.

As you sit here today, do you? Is your spiritual confidence grounded in Jesus' saving death for your sins? Is your trust resting in Jesus' work and not your own works? The gospel is offered to all, but applied only to those who believe. Are you one of them? If not, in your heart and mind today, profess Jesus as your Savior *"...because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* (Romans 10:9)

"...to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

We will unpack this further in Romans, but suffice it to say that Paul wants the Jews and the Gentiles in the Roman church to mutually respect and love each other. The Gentile Christians should appreciate the role of the Jews in salvation. They received God's revelation in the Old Testament. They were given promises through Abraham. They were first chronologically and theologically. Yet the Jewish Christians needed to realize that God's plan included the Gentiles. We too are recipients of God's grace, gospel, and promises. The gospel is for all.

*The condition is not ethnicity but belief.
Not skin color but faith.
Not family tree but faith tree.*

Anyone, no matter who they are, can be saved IF they simply trust in Christ and profess him truly as their Lord and Savior.

It's simple in 1:16, but the next 16 chapters are like taking apart a Ferrari. Most people could drive a Ferrari without knowing all the engineering, just like any child can be saved without understanding the book of Romans. But the spiritual engineering in how God saved us is the greatest wonder of the world.

Two Questions

If the gospel is so powerful, why don't they get it?

You ever wonder that? How can two kids be raised in the same home, where one follows Jesus and one doesn't? Two people hear the exact same gospel sermon. One leaves rejoicing. One leaves scoffing. Why? Romans will get much deeper on this, but in terms of the power of the gospel, it only does its work in those who believe. *"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."* (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Our response in faith, and then the new life we experience through that faith, is the conduit of God's power into our lives. Without the gospel, there is no power. Without the power, there is no transformation. Without transformation, it means you've never received the power of God.

"The gospel is not advice to people, suggesting that they lift themselves. It is power. It lifts them up. Paul does not say that the gospel brings power but that it is power, and God's power at that. When the gospel is preached, this is not simply so many words being uttered. The power of God is at work. When the gospel enters anyone's life, it is as though the very fire of God had come upon him. There is warmth and light in his life."¹ (Leon Morris)

One writer I read gives a helpful illustration² of a jalapeño pepper. I can say all day, *this jalapeño pepper is really hot* [Steve's holding a jalapeño pepper]. I could pass it around the room. You would feel it and say, *it doesn't seem hot to me. How could something so small be powerfully hot?* I urge you to bite it and see.

How many would say, *I don't think so*, then walk away? Be skeptical of any jalapeño eater who urged them to give it a try and see how hot it is. The only way to personally know the heat of a pepper is to eat it yourself. When you eat it, then its power is at work in you.

The gospel is like that. The world looks at it and says, *it seems so small. It doesn't look powerful. It must not be.* And they walk away. But what they fail to realize is that for its power and saving work to be unleashed, it must be "eaten." It must be personally received. Then, and only then, is the true power of God in the gospel unleashed in our lives and will be forever.

If the gospel is so wonderful, why are we (sometimes) ashamed?

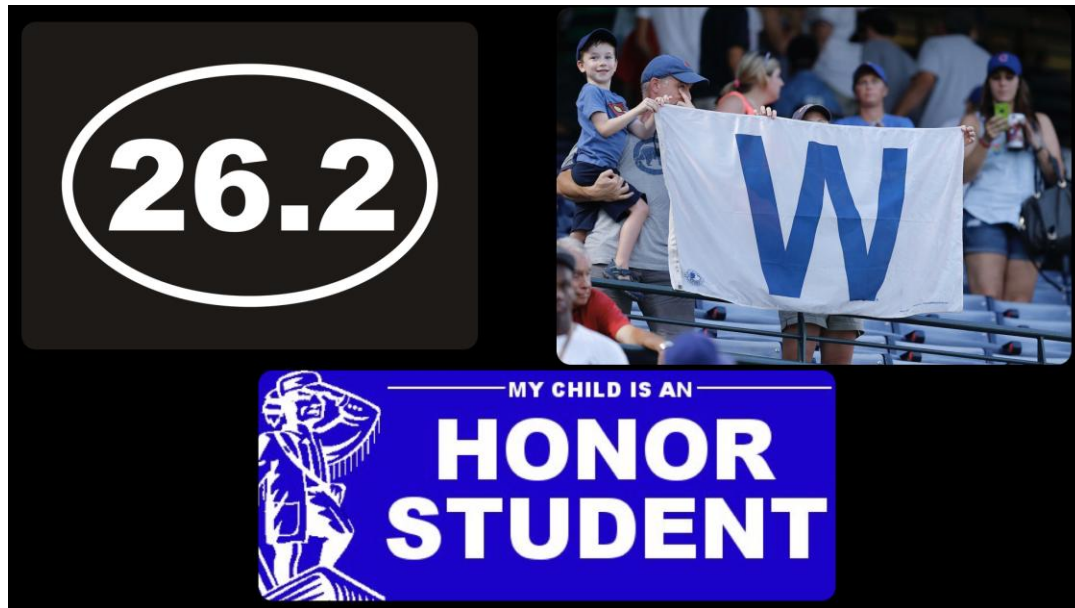
I wish I could say I am never ashamed or I am never hesitant or timid. I am. But what is happening when I feel timid or shame about the gospel? I am trusting and believing the tiny power of man's approval or the tiny power of political correctness or the tiny power of my

¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 67.

² Morris (footnotes), p. 67

own fear. There's no power in these things, and they certainly don't save us, yet we so easily make them so important.

We are unashamed about far less significant things:



There's no power to save in any of these things! Yet, we take such pride in them. Such boldness.

When we feel timid about the gospel, to speak it or to be identified as a Christian in our Rome, we must remember the jalapeño. The gospel is the power of God to save. For anyone who believes. It is what Rome needs.

They may mock and draw our Jesus as a donkey on a cross. But today, who would you rather be? The Roman who drew the graffiti or Alexamenos? Think of the giggles and smirks and maybe even violence done against Alexamenos. Yet, how did the Roman know of Alexamenos' faith? How did that drawing come to be?

Alexamenos was not ashamed of the gospel. He risked it being known. Might he have shared it with the person who drew it? To this man it was nonsense, but to Alexamenos it was the power of God to save. He believed. He is in heaven.

The questions of this verse are, what about you? Do you believe in Jesus as your Savior? And if so, are you not ashamed of it?

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