

# Put Right with God

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 22 November 2006

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, let's turn in our scriptures to Paul's letter to the Romans chapter 1, and we're continuing from where we left off last week. So I'll read again Romans chapter 1, verses 8 to 17.

And God willing, we hope to get into verse 18, I think, next week, but today we're in verse 17. So Romans 1, verses 8 to 17. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

I want you to know, 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.

[ 1 : 13 ] I am under obligation, both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also, who are in Rome.

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. Now our text for this afternoon is the 17th verse of Romans 1, and I'll read it again in just a moment.

But let me first point out Paul's three I am's. I don't know whether you've spotted these here. I was only shown them yesterday by a friend. But Jesus, you may remember, gives us seven I am's in John's gospel.

And Paul gives us three I am's in these verses that are immediately before us. They're a different kind of I am from Jesus' I am's, but they're very striking, and they're all to do with the gospel.

[ 2 : 22 ] So look with me at verse 14. There's the first. I am under obligation. Verse 15 is the second. I'm eager to preach the gospel. And then verse 16 is the third.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel. Now in a way, those three I am's sum up the apostle Paul's life. The gospel is his life and purpose.

He's obliged to preach it. He's eager to preach it. And he's not ashamed of it. Why not? He tells us in verse 16. For it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

And then verse 17. For in it, in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith. As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.

Now I want to suggest today that verses 16 and 17 are the key which unlocks this epistle to the Romans. To look at the matter in musical terms.

[ 3 : 26 ] In many types of music, early on in the piece, perhaps at the very beginning of the piece, you have a strong statement of a particular musical theme or motif. And then as the music develops, that theme is developed or varied or extended.

But it's the key phrase of the piece of music. It's the heart of the piece. And the whole piece is built around it and makes sense in terms of it. Now in just the same way, these two verses at the beginning of Romans are the key.

The chapters that follow are the development of this theme. It is the heart and soul of Romans. So verse 17. In the gospel, Paul writes, the righteousness of God or a righteousness from God is revealed.

Now we'll begin with the verb and we'll come back later to the noun. In the gospel, something is revealed. Now the revealing of something is fundamental to Christianity.

The Bible teaches us that God is a being who reveals himself to mankind. Now he was under no compulsion to reveal the least part of his ways and doings to human beings.

[ 4 : 36 ] But he's chosen to reveal himself. Now this is fundamental. It shows that anything that we know about God is not something that we could ever discover by our own efforts.

It is something that he has shown to us. So the initiative in our understanding of God, our knowledge of God, the initiative always lies with him.

He reveals both himself and the truth about himself. Now as usual, this is the precise opposite of the way that you and I naturally think. Our natural way is to think of religion as being a kind of search or a quest.

People use resounding phrases like, man's pilgrimage in search of the truth. Now that sounds romantic, doesn't it? And heroic. You could make a film out of it.

I guess one of those handsome sunburned Americans like Robert Redford would be the star of the film. And he'd be stopping every five minutes or so to mop his brow and look passionately and intently at the far horizon.

[ 5 : 35 ] And this film would take him in his great search to India to look at the Hindus burning their dead on the banks of the Ganges. He'd perhaps go up into the Tibetan Himalayas riding on a yak and visiting the Lamas in the Buddhist monasteries.

Then he might go to a monastery in Yorkshire in England and watch the monks getting up at three o'clock in the morning and going to church to sing their psalms. And all the audience watching this film would think, this is marvellous.

This is modern Western man at last nauseated by materialism and at last beginning to look seriously at the spiritual aspect of life. Here is man searching for truth at last, searching for God. I think some years ago there was a big documentary series on television with the title The Long Search. It was about religions. And that phrase, The Long Search, neatly sums up man's attitude to religion.

We have the heroic human being valiantly seeking out the elusive and inscrutable God. Now Paul teaches us something quite different here in verse 17.

[ 6 : 43 ] Not that noble man is seeking out an elusive God, but rather that a good God, a wonderful God, is revealing himself to an ignoble mankind.

In the Gospel, verse 17, something from God is revealed, even to those who might not have been consciously looking for it. This is one of the amazing things about the Christian faith, one of the things that sets it quite apart from any of the world's religions.

It is not about man seeking God, it's about God seeking out man and revealing himself to man. As Jesus himself said, the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

So the initiative in putting right the great rift between heaven and earth or between God and man, that initiative has all come from God's side. Now when Paul tells us that the Gospel reveals something, we mustn't understand him to mean that this revelation was totally new in the first century AD.

In fact, Paul himself goes to some trouble to point out that God had been beginning to reveal something of this sort for a very long time already. Just look back to verse 2 in Romans chapter 1 where Paul writes this Gospel which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures.

[ 8 : 06 ] And that's another way of saying that in the Old Testament, God has already dropped a number of very firm hints about the coming Gospel. Or look at the end of our verse 17 which we're studying this afternoon.

As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. And therefore, the Apostle is quoting from the prophet Habakkuk chapter 2 in support of what he's saying. Or take, just to go to another letter for a moment, take the very striking use from Galatians, a striking verse from Galatians chapter 3. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announce the Gospel in advance to Abraham saying all nations will be blessed through you.

So Paul is saying that way back there in the time of Genesis in Abraham's time, the Gospel was beginning to be announced, was beginning to be revealed. Now the reason I'm saying this in connection with Romans 1.17 is lest any of us should mistreat the Old Testament and its purpose.

We've all heard Christians sometimes saying, perhaps we've said it ourselves, the Old Testament really has nothing to say to us today because we live in the New Testament era. So the Old Testament is like the dodo, a lifeless object, fit only to be put in a museum and to have people look at it and say how quaint that is and how irrelevant.

[ 9 : 28 ] Now to think like that about the Old Testament is certainly not to think about it as Jesus thought about it or as Paul thought about it. To them, the Old Testament was the Scripture, the living Scripture, the basis of the Gospel and indeed the foretaste of the Gospel.

So again and again, in Paul's explanations of the Gospel in Romans and in all his letters, he explains the Gospel in terms of the Old Testament. This is true of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

They're constantly saying in their Gospels that such and such happened to Jesus in fulfilment of the Scriptures. Jesus himself said this is to fulfil the Scripture. So going back to Romans 1.17, what the Gospel reveals is not something totally new, something which has never been hinted at before.

On the contrary, the Old Testament is crammed full of the hint and foretaste of the Gospel. The new thing about the Gospel is that it reveals clearly and precisely and in the full light of day what the Old Testament sees more mistily and indistinctly.

It's a little bit like the difference between the half-light of dawn. Did you see the half-light of dawn this morning? Did you look at your face first thing in the mirror and say to yourself what an awful sight it is?

[ 10 : 47 ] In the half-light of dawn we only see things mistily and indistinctly but then we have the full brightness of the noonday which reveals everything before us. Now the Gospel displays in full view what the Old Testament has been suggesting and hinting at for centuries.

Now let's move on. What is it that the Gospel reveals? Well there it is in verse 17. In it, says Paul, in the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed.

Now this English Standard Version that we're using is in many ways a fine and accurate translation but I think it's actually being unhelpful and unclear at this point. It gives us this phrase the righteousness of God but Paul's Greek doesn't actually include the definite article the.

So I think the phrase should better be translated a righteousness from God not the righteousness of God and in a minute or two I'll explain the distinction between those two and why it's important.

But let me ask now for your very best attention for the next ten minutes and I'll try to explain this.

Your attention may have wandered over the last few minutes. You might be thinking a bit about the beach or about what's for lunch and how hungry you are.

[ 12 : 01 ] But if you've been distracted throw your distractions away please and listen for the next few minutes as if your life depended upon it which it might. the question is what is this righteousness from God that the gospel reveals?

Your basic human problem my basic human problem lies in the question how can I be right with God? How can I be sure that at the end of the day that I will stand in a right relationship with God as the judge?

How can I be sure that he will accept me at the end when the books are all opened and the living and the dead are judged? Job in the Old Testament once said how can a man be in the right with God?

Now that is the question that haunts the human race. Deep in our hearts everybody knows that our eternal destiny depends upon being in the right and not being in the wrong when the day of judgment comes.

So what is this righteousness from God that Paul is writing about? Well first let me say what it is not. It is not as I began to say a moment ago it is not the righteousness of God here.

[ 13 : 18 ] Paul is careful in his use of language. He is speaking here about a righteousness that comes from God not the righteousness that is God's and the difference is great.

If he had written that the righteousness of God is revealed that would not be good news. It would be the most alarming news possible because the righteousness of God is his purity his holiness his perfection of character something so pure something so different from ourselves that Old Testament believers thought that to see it would mean their death.

To have God's righteousness revealed his utter moral uprightness would be terrifying. even Moses was not allowed to see God face to face.

How much less would you or I be able to stand such a vision? But I'm glad to say that Paul does not say this in his gospel that the righteousness of God is revealed here in verse 17.

It was precisely at this point that Martin Luther agonized early in the 16th century. Let me read to you a little bit from Luther's autobiography. I greatly longed to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression the righteousness of God because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous.

[ 14 : 51 ] You see this was Luther's distress. He saw the righteousness of God as God's utter purity set over against his own guilty past and he was burdened by all the sins of which he was so painfully conscious.

So to Luther whatever this revelation was about it was not good news it was doom a righteous God set over against a very unrighteous man called Martin Luther.

So it was agony to him it was a death sentence how could he ever get in the right before this righteous God if he spent the rest of his life in fasting and prayer and self humiliation and penance could he ever get his account so to speak out of the red and into the black.

Well let me continue to quote from Luther's autobiography night and day he says night and day I pondered until I grasp the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby through grace and sheer mercy he justifies us by faith thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise the whole of scripture took on a new meaning and whereas before the righteousness of God had filled me with hate now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love this passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven now that's the end of my quote from Luther but let me try and put this all in a slightly different way this righteousness from God revealed in the gospel is not an attribute of God's nature or an aspect of his character here it is a status a status which God in great mercy and love takes and puts upon those who believe in Christ it's as though God takes a garment a shining cloak and wraps it around us and as he puts it on it's as though he lovingly says to us this status that you now bear can never be taken from you it is your permanent possession you are now in the right with me forever and there can be no condemnation for you so do you see this it's not the righteousness of God something to make us quail and tremble something to condemn us it is a righteousness a status of being in the right with God that he gives to us and he gives it to us freely we don't earn it we cannot possibly earn it he puts it upon us and it changes our eternal destiny from hell to heaven now that is good news it's that that the gospel reveals the old testament hinted at it but the gospel has brought it out into broad daylight now let me shift the ground just a little bit a lot of christian people misunderstand the relationship between law and gospel i mean the law of the old testament and the gospel revealed in the new testament and you'll sometimes even hear christian people saying the law failed the old testament well it held out a certain way of living and believing and behaving it held out a standard of righteousness but nobody could match up to it it failed to bring people up to the required level so god almost as a last resort devised the gospel to do what the law had failed to do have you heard people speak like that when folks speak like that they're setting the law and the gospel over against each other as though the law the law of moses were plan a and the gospel was a hurriedly devised plan b which was only brought in at the last minute when plan a failed now as you get to know your bible better you discover that it's impossible to see law and gospel in that relationship to each other jesus said with bold simplicity don't think that i've come to abolish the law and the prophets i've come not to abolish them but to fulfill them paul says something similar in romans 3 31 do we nullify the law by this faith not at all rather we uphold the law and in romans 7 12 the law is holy and the commandment is holy and righteous and good so both to jesus and to paul the law far from being downgraded or discredited by the gospel is upheld by the gospel the two testaments of the bible are an organic whole the gospel if you like is the flowering of the law and the prophets it's the crowning glory of the law and the prophets just as apples are the crowning glory of the apple tree now you might be saying what has this talk about law and gospel got to do with romans 1 17 well i'll try and explain the old testament law is all about righteousness how men and women can live a righteous life so whether you're thinking about the basic fundamentals of old testament law in the ten commandments or whether perhaps you're thinking about the minute ritual requirements of leviiticus regulations which seem rather alien to us about clothing and about how to cut your hair and beard how to deal with skin complaints and that sort of thing whatever part of the old testament law you're thinking about the purpose of it is to show men and women the right way to live to show them the

righteous life now did anybody in old testament times keep the old testament law completely no of course not can anybody today keep the law of god completely of course not it's rather like saying that the correct time for running the mile is one

[ 20 : 43 ] minute anybody knows that no person will ever run the mile in one minute a few people have done it in three minutes fifty seconds hands up if you've done that possibly one or two people in the next ten or twenty years might do it in three minutes and forty seconds but to run a mile in one minute everybody knows that no human being could ever do that now in the same way it's arguable that an individual could keep most of the old testament law for most of the time but for any individual to keep all of the old testament law all of the time is just as feasible as it is for a man to run a mile in one minute it's simply impossible it's beyond anyone's grasp impossible for all people at all times and yet righteousness consists in keeping the law fully so how can a man or a woman ever be righteous before God and yet our verse 17 tells us that such a thing this righteous status before

God has been revealed the righteous status of a law keeper is available to us the gospel tells us of a righteousness for us which comes from God and is provided by God so how does this come about although Paul doesn't say so in this verse he makes it very clear as Romans unfolds that this righteousness comes to us through Jesus and it happens like this the Lord Jesus on our behalf has satisfied all the requirements of the old testament law he's the only man since the human race began who has done this he has obeyed the law in every jot and tittle he's submitted to all its regulations so where the law says don't do this Jesus Christ did not do it and where the law said you must do this he did it and not only did he obey the law completely he's also borne the penalty which the law righteously demands should be paid for human sin the wages that sin pays is death and Jesus accepted that wage so Jesus has honoured the law of the old testament completely he has fulfilled its requirements a. by living a fully righteous life and b. by accepting the penalty demanded by the law for an unrighteous life so there is nothing further that the law could demand of him he has satisfied all its requirements and the gospel reveals that God sent him precisely to do this the righteousness which had eluded the human race up to the coming of

Christ has now been fulfilled by Christ I've not come to abolish the law he says but to fulfill it and the good news is that God now gives to us who believe in Jesus the righteousness or the righteous status of Jesus himself let me put this in a slightly different way by saying that Jesus lived under the law and died under the law vicariously if you do something vicariously it means you do it in place of somebody else so Jesus is obedience to the law's requirements and his death by the law's requirements all that was vicarious he did those things not on his own account but for us he did them in our stead the result is that man in the shape of Jesus has at last fulfilled the law's demands but that's not all when you become a Christian you become incorporated into

Jesus Christ you lose your own original identity as a rebel an outlaw and you assume a new identity or rather God gives you this new identity as a member or part of Christ's body as a Christian you are in Christ you belong to him you're part of him it means that your real identity from the moment of your conversion is fixed in Jesus so after your conversion when God looks at you where does he see you you're no longer to be found in the ranks of the outlaws where you used to be you are now in Christ you've been incorporated into the identity of the one who has satisfied the law's demands you are now righteous in God's sight because you belong to Jesus the righteous one you're a free man therefore or a free woman you're righteous not with your own native righteousness but with Christ's righteousness in the gospel says verse 17 a righteousness from

God is revealed a way of being in the right with God the law is not overthrown or discredited or made to look a failure far from it it is fulfilled it has been obeyed every last one of its requirements has been satisfied by Jesus the representative man into whose righteous status before God we have been graciously incorporated what is there for us to do verse 17 tells us God it is simply a matter of faith from faith for faith we simply believe this for us it begins in faith it ends in faith faith is the top and bottom of it and when Paul speaks of faith here he means that we cannot work our way to this righteous status by our efforts at goodness we could never do that all we need do is trustingly accept God's provision and that's what it means to be a Christian and if you know and believe and understand these things they make you profoundly glad as

[ 26 : 50 ] Martin Luther became eventually you know your eternal destiny and you begin to look forward to it with a great appetite you know that God has done something almost indescribably wonderful in sending Jesus you know that God has provided you with a real and eternal salvation in

the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed and it's yours by faith and no one not the devil himself can take it from you let's bow our heads and we'll pray dear father in heaven you have so graciously and lovingly dealt with our problem our sin our rebellion against you and you've done it by sending your son at a depth of cost to him and to you that we can scarcely imagine but you have done it and we're so glad and so grateful we pray that you'll help us both to understand this now and to grow to understand it more and more as our lives go on so that we may be filled with joy and praise for you and all of it we ask in Jesus name amen amen for among us and how me narrower and going