

Lesson Three

(1:16, 17)

THE THEME OF ROMANS

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. 17 For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith: as it is written, But the righteous shall live by faith.

These verses contain a concise summary of the doctrinal content of the entire book of Romans and are the meat of the book in a nutshell.

Those who lived in the powerful city to which "all roads lead" were not to construe Paul's absence from Rome to be based upon any such false premise that he was ashamed of his message. Over a lengthy span of time (15:23) Paul had longed to go to the Imperial City to share Christian blessings with the existing church (1:11) and to spread the Gospel more widely in Rome and its environs. It was work and not lack of desire nor any misgivings about his message which kept Paul from preaching at Rome. Paul makes a strong affirmation about the Gospel by the use of a negative, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel." This statement of the apostle is said to be an example of the figure of speech known as litotes. The term "litotes" stems from the root word *litos* which means smooth,

THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

plain, or simple. In rhetoric the employment of this figure of speech is an easy, simple way of making a positive statement by negating that which is contrary to that which one wishes to affirm. It was a surprise for me to hear a litotes come from the lips of the baseball sportscaster who was describing the game between the Cincinnati Reds and the San Francisco Giants. When Jim Ray Hart of San Francisco took his stance at the plate, the announcer said, "Jim Ray Hart does not look unlike Willie Mays." Obviously the sportscaster with a double negative was saying that Jim Hart, in his batting stance, looked very much like Willie Mays. Applying the same principle of interpretation Paul is saying positively, "I am *proud* of the Gospel." For another Biblical example of the use of litotes see Acts 21:39 where Paul is affirming with a negative that his hometown, Tarsus, was a great city. Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel for many reasons. Two of these reasons are developed in the theme. First, because by nature it is God's power unto salvation, and secondly, in content it revealed God's plan whereby man might become righteous in God's sight.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

"It is the power of God unto salvation."

Paul's use of the phrase, "power of God" in this passage does not have primary reference to the omnipotence of God. It is true that God is the all-powerful one, and it is equally true that His omnipotence undergirds the entire scheme of redemption even as it pervades the physical universe. Of what value is any news about salvation if God does not have the personal power to fulfill His promises? Paul appeals to the basic essential of God's power in Philipians 3:20, 21 as a reason for assurance of the transformation which shall occur to the saints when Jesus returns. How can Christians possess such hope apart from the knowledge of the power of God by which "He is able to subject all things unto himself"? Here, however, Paul is speaking of the Gospel as embodying and functioning as the agent of God's power. The Gospel is not a blasting dynamite although the word translated "power" (*dunamis*) is the Greek word from which the English word "dynamite" is derived. The Greeks and Romans of that day knew nothing of explosive powder. The Gospel is not an explosive, blasting destructive force except for its effect upon sin. For man it is a sweet message of love, mercy, and grace. The Gospel power is a drawing power. "And I, if I be lifted up will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). The "power of God" of which Paul writes is the potent magnetic force of Calvary and the cross stands at the very heart of the Gospel. God, through the good news about

Christ and Calvary is saying pungently and winsomely, "come and experience the dynamic power of the Gospel which is able to make you righteous." The Gospel is more than a good story. It is not merely passive good news. Rather, it is active and dynamic unto salvation. When the disciples did not understand the parable of the sower and asked Jesus for clarification of his story, the very first words of explanation from the lips of our Lord were, "The seed is the word of God" (Luke 8:11). Seed is life giving! Peter understood the Lord and reminded the Christians of Asia Minor that they had been "begotten again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the word of God which liveth and abideth forever." Then, following an Old Testament quotation of "the word of the Lord" he said, "This is the word of good tidings which was preached unto you" (I Peter 1:23-25). In the beginning God spoke and the result was dynamic and creative. Today God speaks through the Gospel and the result is dynamic and creative. Jesus said that in this Christian era "the dead" (dead in sin) "shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live." They have "passed out of death into life" (John 5:24, 25). So the Christian who is a "born again" person has already experienced one resurrection (Ephesians 2:1, 5, 6; Colossians 3:1-3). How is the voice of Jesus to be heard today and how is the power of the Gospel to be brought to bear upon the sinful condition of man, apart from the presentation of the Gospel to the world? The Gospel truly is "the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth," without any qualification, limitation, or expansion. Thank God for a professor who said to his homiletics class, "Young men, don't you ever preach the Gospel without expecting results." This writer has forgotten much of what that professor said, but these words will continue to be a source of motivation and confidence for him to continue to go around the world a third, fourth, and more times to preach the Gospel if the Lord so wills. Even when the preaching is done in foreign countries, and the preached word must be translated, and sometimes into two or three languages at one session, it is the dynamic, life producing seed which will bear its fruit. Paul had this confidence in the Gospel and made not the slightest apology for God's message which he preached. It was more than powerful enough for the capital city of the most powerful empire on earth. It could convert "Caesar's household," "the praetorian guard" and "all the rest" of the Romans who would come to faith in the marvelous content of the Gospel (Philippians 4:21; 1:13). The only way to dilute the power of the Gospel is by altering its content. It can be changed in degree to the point it is no longer the Gospel at all (Galatians 1:6-10).

THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL

“For therein is revealed a righteousness of God.”

Just as the phrase “power of the Gospel” does not have primary reference to the omnipotence of God so also the phrase “righteousness of God” does not have primary reference to the personal nature of God. There is no question about the character, rectitude or holiness of God, but Paul is not discussing the attributes of God. Rather he speaks of the content of the Gospel which reveals God’s plan whereby man is accepted by God to be righteous. God’s righteous character is absolute, unchangeable, and independent. The righteousness of which Paul speaks, however, is related to and is dependent upon faith. For example, Paul indicates that the righteousness which he possessed was from God “through” (*dia*) and “by” or “upon” (*epi*) faith (Philippians 3:9). Again in Romans 3:22 it is affirmed that this righteousness is from God “through faith.” It is clear that the righteousness of God which Paul discusses is a relative matter. That is, it is related to and dependent upon faith. God’s personal character is in no way affected by faith or the lack of faith in God by men. Another evidence that this righteousness of which Paul speaks is not a reference to the personal nature of God is that it is seen clearly “apart from the law” (Romans 3:21). No one would deny that the character of God was revealed clearly in the law and the prophets. The ninety-eighth Psalm is in its entirety an appeal to the people to praise God for His righteousness. The goodness, holiness, justice and love of God is set forth clearly in the Old Testament. But God’s plan for making men righteous through the death of his Son was only seen dimly through type and prophecy in the Old Testament. “The righteousness of God in 1:17 has primary reference to God’s right way, His Gospel plan, His scheme of redemption. A striking example of the use of the word righteousness with reference to God’s right way is found in Matthew’s account of the baptism of our Lord (Matthew 3:15). After John’s protest that he was not worthy to baptize Jesus, the Lord responded to John: Allow this kind of a relationship and action now, “for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus was not suggesting that in his obedience he was in some way fulfilling God’s character. Instead he was indicating that God wanted him to be baptized, and he wished to do things God’s way. It appears that Paul, in Romans, is using the word righteousness with the same meaning that Jesus gave to it in his discussion with John when Paul observes that the Jews were “ignorant of God’s righteousness.” They sought to “establish their own” and would not “subject themselves to the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:2). One does not subject himself to attributes or characteristics. Paul says the Jews failed to obey the right way of God which was revealed fully in the Gospel.

This righteousness is said to be of God because God is its author. It is a plan which God wholly approved, revealed, and set into operation so that it would bear dynamically on man's sinful situation. No Bible teaching is more plain than that man does not possess a righteousness of his own and that he is destitute of any means to produce righteousness by himself. (Romans 3:10; cf. Isaiah 64:6; I Corinthians 1:30; II Corinthians 5:21; Romans 5:17; Philippians 3:10; Ephesians 2:8-10)

RIGHTEOUSNESS DEPENDENT UPON FAITH

17 For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith; as it is written, But the righteous shall live by faith.

Faith is absolutely basic in the Christian system, and it is true that at no time, under any system of worship, has God asked for any act of service or worship apart from faith. God has sent his witnesses to give credible testimony, but men must believe (I Corinthians 1:21; Romans 10:13, ff.; John 5:39, 46, 47). Our faith (Hebrews 11:6) is of no more value than the faith of Abraham (Hebrews 11:13, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar . . .").

Two words are used regularly by Bible exegetes to explain this phrase which inextricably relates the righteousness which God grants to man to the faith which is resident in his heart and mind. How are we to understand "faith unto faith"?

One word of explanation is "progression." Some would apply the concept of progressive faith to the revelation of God's will given throughout the centuries and suggest that Paul had in mind continuous revelation from the book of Genesis to that of the book of Revelation (Hebrews 1:1, 2). John Calvin thought Paul had in mind the progression of Christian growth so that one would proceed from a weak faith to a strong faith. Calvin's view would be comparable to the common concept of a Christian beginning as a newborn babe and continuing in growth to become a full grown man in Christ. Others apply the concept of progression to evangelism and read into Paul's mind the idea of the faith spreading from person to person and generation to generation and nation to nation.

More frequently the word "intensity" is used to explain the phrase "from faith unto faith." The idea is advanced that Paul means that one is saved "entirely by faith." The New International Version translates: "by faith from first to last." There are numerous examples in Scripture of repetition of terms like "faith unto faith" for the purpose of intensification. See such passages as Romans 6:19, "sin unto sin"; II Corinthians

THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

2:16 "death unto death" or "life unto life"; and John 1:16 where the preposition is changed from "unto" to "for" but the principle of intensification is the same, "grace for grace." This latter suggestion of intensification is probably the best way to understand the repetition of the word faith. The Bible student should beware of theological developments which stem from Luther's *sola fide* (faith only) written in the margin of his Bible at Romans 1:17 and remember that salvation is attributed to some sixteen different things in the New Testament. It is dangerous to add "only" to the text of God's Word at any point. The only place in the New Testament where the words "faith only" are found together is in James 2:24 which states clearly that one is not justified "only by faith." A full discussion of the phrase "faith unto faith" may be read in *The Epistle to the Romans*, Murray, pages 363-374.

There are three historical views of the way by which a man is accepted to be righteous by God.

1. The Pelagian view (Pelagius, A.D. 360-420) Every man has complete freedom of will to choose good, and righteousness is obtained by proper choices and participation in works that are ethically good and proper. For a synopsis of the related teachings of Pelagius, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, F. L. Cross, p. 1040.
2. The Romanist view suggests that any good works done apart from grace and before regeneration have no bearing upon one's righteousness. The righteousness which brings acceptance with God is dependent upon a combination of the natural man aided by prevenient grace (this is grace wholly initiated by God apart from any response of man previous to conversion) plus meritorious works done by man after regeneration.
3. The Biblical view is that righteousness received by man from God is not the result of something arranged by man, done by man, nor wrought in man but rather is the result of that which was done for us by Christ and freely bestowed upon us when we choose to believe in God's plan and provision. So righteousness is not obtained by us nor wrought in us. It is "the gift of righteousness . . . through the one, even Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:17). Note that the designation "Biblical View" is used here rather than "Protestant View" or "Reformation Theology View." The reason for this choice of terminology is that there are numerous shadings of the so-called Protestant and Reformation views of righteousness, many of which the author does not consider to be Biblical.

There are five pivotal concepts in the theme of Romans:

1. The Power of God
2. Salvation
3. Revelation
4. Righteousness of God
5. Universality of redemption

It is a bit surprising to note how all five of these concepts, in one form or another, are found in the Old Testament passages (Psalm 98:1, 2; Isaiah 46:13; 51:5-8; 54:17; 56:1; 61:10, 11; 62:1, 2). The readers should keep in mind that Old Testament passages which refer to the "righteousness" of God refer primarily to God's character. His love, for example, may be seen in his planned provision for man's salvation, but the specifics of God's plan to redeem man through His Son were not revealed until the Gospel came.

Gospel

1. Powerful
2. Righteousness of God
3. Unto Salvation
4. Universal
5. Belief

Law

1. Weak, Romans 8:1-4
2. Human Righteousness, Romans 10:1-3; Philippians 3:9
3. Unto Condemnation, Romans 7:9, 10; Galatians 3:10, 11; II Corinthians 3:6-9
4. Jewish exclusivism, Romans 3:21-23; 10:11-13
5. Legal Works (meritorious), Romans 9:30-32; 10:3-5

READER'S REVIEW:

1. What figure of speech is used by Paul to declare personal feelings about the Gospel?
2. Cite another Biblical example of Paul's use of the same figure of speech.
3. Explain why the phrase "power of God" does not have a direct primary reference to God's omnipotence.
4. Why is God's omnipotence important to the Gospel plan of salvation?
5. Why is the comparison of the Gospel to dynamite a poor analogy?
6. What is the basic function of the power of the Gospel in the mind of man?

THIRTEEN LESSONS ON ROMANS

7. Cite an example or two from the teaching of Jesus which would lead his disciples to understand that the Word of God is powerful.
8. How many resurrections will one who becomes a Christian experience?
9. What is it that energizes and gives life in the first resurrection of the Christian?
10. What would influence Paul to place such strong emphasis upon the power of the Gospel in the Roman epistle?
11. What is the statement of Paul as to the content of the Gospel?
12. State two arguments cited by the author to support his contention that the phrase "righteousness of God" does not refer to the personal character of God.
13. In what sense is it proper to say that the righteousness of God was plainly and fully revealed in the Old Testament?
14. Cite one example from the life of Jesus in which the record makes it quite clear that Jesus used the word "righteousness" to refer to God's plan for his own personal life.
15. What was the basic sin of the Jews in their response to God's righteousness?
16. What are the two words used by Bible exegetes to help one to understand the phrase "faith unto faith"?
17. Which of the above two words do you think is best? Defend your choice.
18. What is the major danger of explaining "faith unto faith" to mean "entirely by faith"?
19. List and explain the three historic views of the way by which God accepts men to be righteous.
20. What are the five major theological concepts which are found in these two verses and in the Old Testament as well?