

How To Not Be Ashamed of Sharing Your Faith

Rich Nathan

Sermon—July 1 and 2, 1995

Romans 1:14-17

Romans: Celebration of the Gospel

This morning I am going to start a new series from the book of Romans. I don't know how long I am going to continue in the book. I may simply end with the end of chapter three or continue. But I find myself a hopeless addict when it comes to the book of Romans.

This past week, as some of you know, I was out in California doing some conferences for different Vineyard churches. I did a conference for David Parker. Some of you know David who has come in to teach here on several occasions. He is a very much loved and well-respected teacher throughout the Vineyard. I did a conference for him on worship. Then I flew down to San Diego to do a conference for Don Williams, who has also been in to teach here. That conference was about spiritual warfare.

While I was out in California in my own devotional time, I began reading the book of Romans again and I was immediately hooked. It really doesn't matter how many times I have read the book and studied the book, I tell you, I really am an addict. I just get near the book of Romans and the force of the power of that letter just pulls me into its orbit and I find myself talking about it with everyone I meet and personally meditating on some of the little phrases and thrilling over them. I would love to have a church of Romans addicts – people who are saturated with an understanding of this letter.

This letter of Paul's has more than once changed the course of Christian history as important people have gotten hold of its message. Back in the fourth century, a man by the name of Augustine who was in total bondage to sexual sin, just completely wrapped up in lust, got hold of the book of Romans. His mother, Monica, was praying for his salvation and praying for change in his life. Augustine began reading the book of Romans and it just absolutely changed the whole course of his own life, in terms of personal freedom and personal liberty. But then it also changed the course of history. Augustine laid the foundation of about a thousand years of Christian history because of the power conversion worked in his own life.

And then in the 1500's, a catholic monk who was totally anxious and fearful as he contemplated the judgment of God, a catholic monk who tried everything to achieve right-standing with God. This monk who fasted day after day and who beat his own body and who locked himself up in towers, refusing to eat certain foods, who kept himself from being married in order to somehow purify himself—this catholic monk had opened up to him a few verses from the book of Romans. He began to understand the message of this powerful book and it changed the course of human history. The monk's name was Martin Luther. And his just getting hold of the book of Romans and a couple of very key concepts shattered the whole medieval catholic world of penance and purgatory and indulgences and earning your way to salvation.

Then in the 1700's another man who was also anxious about his own salvation and who tried everything to find peace of mind listened in a church one evening to Martin Luther's commentary on the book of Romans being read. And he said as he sat there listening to the commentary on Romans being read, that he felt his heart strangely warmed. He knew that he was saved. This man's name was John Wesley. And Wesley went out through all of England preaching a message that you could know that you are born again and again. Church history was changed. The foundation of the Methodist church was laid and these crazy circuit riding preachers went through the American frontier telling people that they could know that they are saved.

In this century, a brilliant theologian looked over the theological landscape of Europe with all of its optimism about man's ability and achievement and goodness. This man got hold of the book of Romans and saw that Christianity was all about what God does and God's initiation. He took the book of Romans like a sledgehammer and slashed liberalism and the whole German philosophic school that had been growing for two hundred years came tumbling to the ground as this shattering new commentary on Romans was written. The man's name was Carl Barthe. Whatever you think of him, if you have even heard of him, or his writings, he single handedly pulled down liberalism in Europe in the 20th century.

And so coming from where I am coming from, every time I get near to the book of Romans, I just get drawn in. I am an addict. And it is so fitting that as we prepare ourselves for the Summer Harvest that most of you know about, we are having four days of events at the end of the summer, music and food, a speaker coming in to communicate the gospel to your friends and your relatives and your neighbors, your co-workers and fellow students that you go to school with—as we prepare for that, and we are doing a series of outreaches both among children with backyard Bible and adults with our line dancing and breakfasts and celebrations and all of that—it is all together fitting that we look at the clearest explanation of the gospel that we have in the Bible by going back to the source, the book of Romans.

Now, this entire series I am entitling "A Celebration of the Gospel" and I am calling today's message, "How to Not Be Ashamed of Sharing Your Faith."

Let's turn to Roman's chapter 1. I am not going to start at the beginning of the chapter. I want to plunge right into the message. Beginning in verse 14:

"I am obligated both to Greeks and 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. 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.'"

Now, I want you to see Paul's three statements regarding how he personally feels in relationship to the gospel and in relationship to his own Christian life. Number one: I am obligated (verse 14), "I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks; number two: verse 15, "I am eager to preach the gospel"; and, number 3, "I am not ashamed of the gospel". I am obligated. I am eager. And I am not ashamed.

These really lay out a framework for a Christian's attitude toward the world as you go out to work, as you relate to someone in the work place, or you relate to a relative, relate to a neighbor, relate to your parents, to a fellow student. These are three things that are kept in mind. I am obligated. I am eager. I am not ashamed.

Now, this first statement, I am obligated, literally Paul is saying, "I am indebted." I am in the debt of Greeks and non-Greeks, that is of everyone regarding this message of the gospel. You know, this notion of owing people the message of the gospel, of being indebted to them, what a different view of witnessing there is here versus the typical attitude that we have in sharing our faith. We will talk about being ashamed in just a moment. But even if we are not ashamed and we are not afraid or full of fear, wanting to keep everything silent regarding our Christianity, how few of us see that we owe people the gospel.

Typically, the approach I would have toward sharing my faith and I would expect most of you to have toward sharing your faith is that sharing your faith and witnessing is an option as a Christian. It is something that you do with someone if a list of contingencies and conditions are met. You know, you share your faith if it is not terribly uncomfortable and if they inquire and press you to the wall. If you have no other choice and if you will be totally accepted and if you feel spiritual and you haven't been involved in significant sin and not feeling upset with yourself and on and on. We see witnessing to Jesus Christ as an option. Paul saw it as a debt, something that he owed people. And that the honorable thing to do is to pay your bills.

You say how is my sharing the gospel a debt that I owe?

Well, there are two ways to be in debt. One way is for someone to give you something and you owe that back to them. For example, I give you \$500 as a loan and then you are indebted to me to pay me back that loan. Paul is not talking about that here. He is not saying that Greeks and non-Greeks, that is the whole world, gave him something and that because they were so nice to him, he owes them the gospel message.

There is a second way that a person can be indebted. That is if you are given something as a trust, to take care of it, for another. For example, a father or mother could put money in a bank that is for the account of their child. The bank owes a debt to that child, to pay the child that amount if the child goes in with their bank book. And I believe this is exactly what Paul is thinking about here when he says I am obligated to the world regarding the gospel message. He is thinking about the fact that God has put in him on deposit, for the sake of the world, a message that can save. It wasn't just to terminate on Paul. It was to go out to others.

I am afraid, brothers and sisters, that it is not often enough communicated to Christians that their receipt of the gospel is not just something for them, but it is a sacred trust, a treasure, now owed to others. That in receiving the message for one's self and beginning to experience the power of the message, this trust, this treasure, is being kept for others – you owe it to others to communicate what has occurred in your life because of your experience of Jesus and the experience of the gospel message.

And Paul always sees his receipt of the gospel as a stewardship, as a trust. He is not an owner. He is a herald (an announcer, a broadcaster). It doesn't end with him. He is not a cup. He is a pipe. He is a funnel.

And friends, I don't want to in any way communicate a guilt motivation here or a legalism when I use the words "obligate" or "indebted". I am simply quoting Paul. I believe that the obligation is one of those wonderful obligations of Jesus where he says, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." It is some oppressive thing to make yourself feel horrible about yourself. Indeed, Paul says that as he considers this wonderful obligation and debt, he says that it stimulates him all the more and therefore he is eager to preach (verse 15). When you realize you owe something, then the honorable thing to do is to pay it.

And, frankly, even if we don't see witnessing as an option, we often see sharing the gospel as a super-spiritual achievement for which we ought to be commended and celebrated. WOW! I did something incredible. I shared with another individual my faith in Christ and what Jesus could do for them. Paul is trying to say here that it is not an option and it is not super spirituality, something for which you should be commended and celebrated. You have been given a great trust. It is just the honorable thing to do, to pay your debts.

Now Paul goes on in verse 16 and says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." You know, this word "shame" has been a popular word in recent therapy and a lot of the psychological literature. There has been a great amount of discussion about shame-based parenting that I think has been very helpful. You know, the kind of child-raising in which a child is controlled and gotten to do what the parent wants the child to do through the weapon of shame instead of through love or affirmation or, even, discipline. The child is controlled and parented by the use of shame. Look at you, you don't measure up. You are a bad boy. You are a bad girl. You have disappointed me. You have a dirty mind. You never quite measure up to mother or father's approval. Children are verbally abused by shame-based parenting. And so many of you sitting here were raised in homes that were shame-based. And we need to come out from under that. Certainly, we have all had experiences in the past that were wounding experiences because they created shame.

But as I thought further of this statement, "I am not ashamed of the gospel" it occurred to me that there was nothing else in all the universe that one could make this statement about other than the gospel. That there is no one, no person, no system, no achievement, no accomplishment, no philosophy that you could, with complete integrity, say that "I have no sense of disappointment about this. I have no sense of shame." Everything else, everyone else, when you examine that thing, that person, that system or that organization under a microscope and say, "Well, there are some flaws here and it brings me shame."

Many of you know that I used to be a lawyer and held my license for a number of years before I went on inactive status when I began to pastor here. But, as a former lawyer, I am ashamed, very often, of the American legal system, the criminal justice system, as I look at the way that courts now dispense what is supposedly justice. The absolute sham that is going on in criminal trials, the miscarriage of justice, the twisting of truth, the spinning out of the most impossible lines of reason and logic for the purpose of distorting things and putting a new spin on stuff. When children can admit to murdering their parents

while their parents are sitting on the sofa watching television as in the Menendez case. Or when you look at the current situation in the OJ trial or the spins put on those who have committed grievous crimes and how their reputations are resurrected in the public minds. You know, I am ashamed of being a part of this whole system, at being part of this whole profession, that weaves things together that are entirely false. I don't know any attorney, with integrity, that doesn't wince at times looking at other lawyers' activities.

And so it is in every profession. I don't know any professional in any profession that doesn't look at their co-workers, the colleagues, and wince at times at some of the practices. You may be in the health care profession and see the waste, the fraud. You see people being given unnecessary treatments. You watch the billing practices and the way that physicians or nurses or health care professionals relate to patients and it causes you some degree of shame.

The same thing could be said of teachers or any profession. This weekend we are celebrating Independence Day. And as I thought about this issue of shame, it occurs to me that no matter how patriotic you are or how much you love and respect this country, or even how much you have sacrificed for it through military service, through the loss of a loved one in a foreign war, can anyone honestly say that there is nothing about this country or its politicians that doesn't create a sense of embarrassment or shame? One need only to explore America's racial history and the history of treatment of minorities, not only Orientals, Jews and the Irish, but certainly the treatment of Blacks and Native Americans. You only need to watch a film clip of Blacks in the South thirty years ago being fire hosed. You only need to read a little bit of our history to feel a sense of embarrassment and shame regarding portions of America's past, as would be the case with any nation on earth.

You only need to read the history of Great Britain or Germany or Russia or any country and its treatment of minorities and its occupation and corruption and anyone around the world would feel shame to some degree, if they are honest. Can you listen to current politicians who are our leaders who are speaking and not wince? If you have the least discernment you have to be ashamed of the current crop of political leaders. The hypocrisy, the meaninglessness of their words, their personal ethics, sexually and in handling financial matters, their personal dealings, sexual harassment, stock transactions and all of the rest.

Then you bring it closer to home and you look at yourself and how you have conducted yourself and your behavior and your attitudes, what you have said, your marriage, your parenting, your past—certainly with respect to ourselves, there are things that we have done and said and felt and related as that are shameful.

What I am driving at friends, is that when you survey the world, the professional world, the vocational world, the political world, the personal world, all of the philosophies, every person, everything, we have reason to be ashamed. Except with respect to this one thing: the Gospel. Only the gospel, only about the gospel can you say, "I am not ashamed."

See everything else, when you look at it closely, when you hold it up to a microscope, even the church, even this church that I dearly love and I am very proud of and enjoy the people of this church and enjoy what God has given us in the Vineyard in terms of growth and the blessing that has been on us and the

health of the people and all of that, but I know the church as an insider and I see the problems and flaws. I see what people give financially and what folks really do in their homes. I hear the stories. I know the larger church world and the whole Christian system. I am telling you that the only thing that you can ever say when we look at it super closely under a microscope that there is no cause for shame in the gospel.

The more you examine the gospel and the more you understand it, the more you hold it up to the light and put it under a microscope, the gospel is the only thing that appears better and better to you, more and more glorious, something that you say, "My God, I didn't realize how wonderful. I didn't fully appreciate this before. I didn't know what a treasure you had given us." Everything else looks worse upon close scrutiny and in the light of clear truth and the judgment of God, but only the gospel will never make you ashamed.

Now, the Bible acknowledges that we will be tempted to become ashamed of the gospel and our being associated with the gospel as Christians. Otherwise, the Bible wouldn't regularly tell us to not be ashamed if this wasn't a temptation. If this wasn't something that people would likely do, we wouldn't be told, "Do not be ashamed." Jesus even had to warn us against being ashamed of him in Mark 8:38. Jesus said, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

The apostle Paul needed to tell Timothy over and over again in 2 Timothy 1, "Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord". In verse 12 of 2 Timothy 1, "Yet I am not ashamed because I know of whom I believed in." Don't be ashamed, Timothy. Don't be ashamed, Vineyard. Don't be ashamed of sharing you faith and don't be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul says, "I am not ashamed."

We have to be told to not be ashamed because we know that in lots of settings, among lots of different kinds of people, Christianity is not politically correct. It is viewed as entirely incorrect. And it is not popular. See, the gospel is a confrontation and a challenge to people regarding their lust. It challenges people about our sexuality. And the gospel has places that say "no" to what we want to do whether it is sleep with your boyfriend or girlfriend or be involved in homosexuality or use pornography. The gospel is a resounding "no." And in as much as there is a no in the gospel, it is a stumbling block.

It is certainly the case that the gospel confronts not only our lusts and our immorality, but the gospel confronts us at our point of self-centeredness and most of all it confronts our pride. You can't preserve your pride in tact and become a Christian. You can get involved in religion and have religion and church be a nice add-on to your life. You could have your great career and your great house and your great sense of success and achievement and never be made to feel personally helpless. Never be brought to your knees and open up your hands with a sense of neediness and emptiness and insufficiency as you deal with religion. But the gospel, and the message of the cross, of Jesus Christ being your only hope of salvation with God, to tell a person that you are helpless, and hopeless and completely insufficient. That the only answer for you is to totally surrender to Jesus, to give up complete control of your life and to rely on the life, death and resurrection of Christ to gain you right standing with God. I am

telling you, that is a stumbling block, a problem, a major obstacle for the successful, the wealthy and the proud.

Why are we talked to about temptations to be ashamed? Because there are many temptations out there. We know this message is not going to be a popular one in some circles, among some people. Why then should we never be ashamed of the gospel, even while in some circles it is politically incorrect, and in other circles it will be rejected because it is a confrontation to our sexuality, to our dishonesty, to our hypocrisy, to our pride? We need to build confidence in the gospel. Friends, I want to remind you that I am not trying to build up confidence in yourself or in church history or in Christian behavior or even in the Vineyard, but in this message. That no matter where you are or who you are talking to, what setting you are in, you as a Christian, never need to be ashamed about what you believe and what you have bought into.

This isn't just an experience, a little bit of feeling that you got in a church meeting. We are talking about the gospel. The more you explore the evidence regarding the truthfulness of this message, the more utterly convinced you will be that we are talking about the truth. The more you study and look into all of the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, you will come to the conclusion if you look into it, that it is a virtual impossibility that anything happened to the body of Jesus other than he rose from the dead. You don't have to be ashamed in a university setting or among intellectuals to hold up the gospel message as if you are holding up something that has been proven false or archaic and has been thrown on the trash heap of intellectual history. Some medieval message that modern people could not believe. The more you look into the gospel message, the more convinced you will be that, indeed, it is credible.

You never need to be ashamed when you confront suffering. Friends, you know the one thing that will shut someone's mouth as they are going on and on prattling about their philosophies and their religions is to look into the eyes of someone who has suffered, someone who has experienced great loss, someone who has been battered by life. Here you are with your philosophies, what are you going to say to the person who has been smacked around and sexually abused? Who has watched families go up into the chimneys of Auschwitz? I could not be a Christian if what I am committed to did not adequately respond to human suffering. If I had to stand and put my hand on my mouth, just completely shut up when confronted with someone's tattoo on their forearm or someone's discrimination or someone's harassment. I would walk away from the whole Christian enterprise.

The gospel tells me that my God had nails driven through his hands for the salvation of the world. We, Christians, of all people on the face of the earth, have nothing to be ashamed about as we look into the eyes of human suffering because our God has identified with the least, the last, the lost and the lowest.

But Paul tells why he is not ashamed of the gospel. He says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation." You are going out into the marketplace, into the world of people and their problems and you say, "What have I got to deal with the power that is holding this human being captive?" Someone comes along to you and describes one of the really horrible problems of life, they are addicted to heroine or to some life controlling habit. Their marriage is shattered into a thousand pieces because of unfaithfulness.

They are going through a brutal divorce. They have been dealt a devastating blow regarding their health and a diagnosis that they are terminal. They have discovered a cancer in their body that is ticking away like a time-bomb. You on the scene as a person shares with you, their heart-rending problem. And you say, "What have I got to offer this person?"

Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God."

Friends, do you understand what the apostle Paul is communicating here? That there is no greater power than the power of the gospel. There is nothing. No power of addiction, no power of death, no power of anxiety, no shattered relationships, no church splits, no alienation, no sin, no nothing that is stronger than the gospel message. We are talking about the power of God.

And I know when people talk with you and you are caught in the emotion of their pain or you are caught in the emotion of your own pain, those things seem like Goliaths. They seem mammoth. You look into your little bags of rocks, like David, tiny little stones. Goliaths are coming at you causing you to be afraid, mocking you, tempting you to be ashamed. You have your little stone called the gospel and I am telling you it is the power of God to take down every Goliath. There is nothing in your life and there is nothing in the life of anyone else that can't be addressed by the gospel message. We have nothing to be ashamed about. And no place where we need to be ashamed that we are holding on to this precious message.

This message is the Gospel of God. It is not the pep-talk of God. It is not God's Word to broken people—You can do it. It is not the rallying speech of God. It is not the inspiration of God, it is not the encouragement of God. If it was just a pep-talk of God's, we would have reason to be ashamed as we look into the eyes of a person who has cancer who cannot do it. As we look into the eyes of a person who is in bondage, some habit, some drug. As we look into the eyes of a woman who is mourning the loss of her child or grandchild or spouse. If our message were a pep-talk we would have reason to be ashamed because there are many situations where a person cannot do it, cannot rally, cannot overcome.

The message is not a pep-talk from God and it is not more information from God, more insight. The kind of thing that one may get from therapy. Yes I see now, why I have problems. It started when I was age 4 or 5. It started over here in this school situation or with my Dad. Or in this shame based experience. If the message was just simply that, we would have reason to be ashamed. This is the gospel of God.

The gospel is power. It is the ability to lift us up, to change us, to transform us, to convert us, to break bondages. It is the power of God to save us.

Friends, I want to tell you by way of my own personal testimony, my own story, that I have been now a Christian for more than two decades. I was converted to Christ and to the gospel message when I was 18 years old. I was coming out of a Jewish background, out of an atheist background and I have watched personally the power of the gospel to save marriages that are shattered by adultery. I have seen it. I have watched couples get reconciled because of the power of Jesus Christ to change people. To bring about forgiveness in their hearts, to bring about humility. I have watched marriages that absolutely should have ended in divorce get resurrected from the dead by the gospel message.

I have seen, personally, people come off of heroin by the power of the gospel message. I have seen alcoholics break the power of alcoholism as people yielded control of their lives to Jesus Christ. I have watched people who have struggled with homosexuality and sexual addictions break free of those life controlling habits by the power of the gospel.

The gospel is a power that produces an effect. It produces change in people's lives. That is why I am not ashamed to preach it. It is not just truth. The gospel works. It does what it is advertised to do.

You know a few weeks ago, we had about 50 baptisms on Saturday night and Sunday morning. And before people were baptized, we had them fill out forms describing why they felt that they were, in fact, Christians. Why they believed that they were born again. You know one of the really encouraging things that I have gotten a chance to do over the last 6 months was read over people's forms and read story after story of the impact of the gospel message on individual lives. Person after person wrote that, indeed, they had been changed not just from the outside in because they hung around with Christians and were told that this particular behavior was bad or that attitude needed changing. They weren't changed because of cultural conditioning or because of new information they received. It was because from the inside God lit a fire in their lives and burned up some habits. From the inside they had a changed orientation. They just felt the presence of this other person, Jesus. They felt his love and his power. No one had to talk to some of these people regarding things to repent of or things to turn away from. They did so almost on their own. But they all acknowledged that it was because of the gospel.

Because of the gospel some people moved out from living with their boyfriends or girlfriends. Because of the gospel, people's marriages got fixed. Because of the gospel, folks went back to people they had hurt and asked their forgiveness.

Why is Paul not ashamed of the gospel? Why am I not ashamed? Because it is the power of God for salvation.

When we are talking about salvation, we are going to explore this term in future weeks, but certainly the reason Paul uses that term is the word "salvation" is the most inclusive word possible for the entirety of the blessing coming to someone through the gospel message. The word "salvation" is bigger than justification, that is to be declared right in the sight of God. It is bigger than sanctification, that is to be made right in the sight of God. The word "salvation" includes all of the answers that God gives for all that overwhelms us. Whatever beats you down, whether it is your own sin or someone else's sins, your guilt, your anxieties and fears about the future, the fear of death, the fear of the judgment of God, your sense of meaninglessness or purposelessness or emptiness. Bitterness has gotten into you because of something that someone did. Whatever is overwhelming to you, the gospel is God's ability to save you from that.

Paul says I want to use the biggest word possible to communicate to you how proud I am of this message. The word "salvation" includes all of the blessings of God that makes us whole, healthy, well and sound in body and mind and spirit. Every blessing that God can bless you with comes through the gospel message. Even your body will ultimately be sick and made well and perfect

when you are given your resurrection body and that comes through the gospel message and your believing that.

Why was Paul not ashamed? Why does he call us to not be ashamed? Because he has seen in his own life and he has seen in the life of others, and I could say what I have seen in my own life and have witnessed in the lives of others, I have watched the power, a force that changes people, that brings blessing in every sphere.

And this power and force to change and to transform, to bless in all spheres is something that Paul says is for everyone. I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God, number one, for salvation. Number two, for all, to everyone who believes. One of the things that I am the proudest of, the I exalt in and celebrate over and over again as I think about the gospel is that this is a message for everyone on earth. You will never meet anyone who the gospel message does not apply to. It is for all. We would have cause to be ashamed if this was just an American deal that had no applicability to a Japanese person or a Cambodian, that this had no application in the Third World. Or if this was a deal only for those with grades and academic prowess and had no application to the illiterate or the poor. If it was a white deal, a Caucasian deal or a Jewish deal, or a deal only for adults but not children. Or for children, but not for adults who knew more and were more mature.

Friends, do you understand that you have been entrusted with a message that applies to everyone you will ever meet? That thought thrills me. And that is the reason you never need to be ashamed.

Back in college, I was friends with a young man who really got involved in eastern religions, in these really esoteric philosophies and meditation techniques. He left school for six months and went to California to be involved in a Trappist Monastery where they were practicing some exotic form of Zen. This guy was into all of it. I would witness to him and share with him about Jesus and what Jesus had accomplished for us at the cross. He would talk with me and try to convince me of the profundity of meditation and how incredibly better it was than what I was sharing with him.

Well, this young man was working in a nursing home as an aide. One day he met a woman who was elderly, who was hooked up to some machines and who was in a deep depression. He was talking with her and he tried to explain to her this really involved philosophy that he had looked into and thought was so glorious. He said after a few paragraphs of explanation, as she looked blankly at him, he realized that the only people who could lay hold of what he was into were wealthy, suburban, academically advanced people like himself. That it had no application in the nursing home. It was because he was so ashamed with how inadequate what he had given his life to was to meet the needs of a dying old person that he gave his life to Christ. He said, "Rich, I have to have something that makes a difference in the life of anyone that I talk to."

You know, A. Stephen, an Indian missionary who was just here at church several weeks ago and who our Vineyard has been supporting for over a decade, A. Stephen goes out into the streets among the most illiterate people on the face of the earth; people who have never been to school; people who couldn't read a word if it was the most simple of words; some of whom don't even have written languages; certainly no Bible in their own languages. He explains the gospel

using color pictures, a four-panel picture. He shows a page that is dark and he communicates to the person that is their heart that has been darkened by sin. He shows a page where the page is red. He communicates to them this is the blood of Jesus that can cleanse your darken hearts. He shows a page that is white and clean and says, "This is what will happen to your heart if Christ comes in."

It is a message for everyone. For the elderly. For the dying. For a three year old who is afraid of lightening at night. For you who have been through a divorce. For Ph.D.'s, for brilliant minds like Blaise Pascal and Isaac Newton and Leonardi da Vinci. C.S. Lewis. For the illiterate. A message that transcends race and ethnicity, age and education. All you need to do with this message is believe it. Trust it. You don't have to achieve anything. You don't have to do anything. You don't have to accomplish anything. All you need to do is believe. Rely on the death of Jesus on the cross for your sins. Trust Christ to save you and you will be saved. It is something that any person can do is trust and believe.

Why does the gospel have such power for everyone? Verse 17: "Because in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed." The righteousness of God, I am going to be talking about that little phrase over the next number of weeks. But what Paul is speaking about here is not ethical virtue. When he speaks of righteousness, he is not talking about becoming a nice person—being a nice mother or a kind father. The righteousness of God is that righteousness with which God allows you to be in a right relationship with him. The righteousness of God is being viewed by God as being utterly all right. The picture is one of the courtroom and you and I standing before the bar of judgment. And having God declaring us to be radically and utterly right with him. This is what the gospel gives you and I—right standing, approval, acceptance, affirmation, acquittal, as you approach God.

Paul says that this right standing, this legal judgment that you are okay, that God is satisfied with you, this right standing is from faith to faith. How does it come to us? From faith to faith?

This little phrase has been variously interpreted as has every little phrase in these verses. In fact, these are a string of pearls that you could meditate on. Each little phrase is like a morsel of food at a wonderful meal that any connoisseur would love to savor. You could take each phrase and savor them. Paul says this right standing comes from faith to faith. What does that mean?

Some interpreters believe it means from the faithfulness of God to the faith of the believer. From the divine realm to the human realm. Some interpreters believe that it means from one degree of faith to another. That is they picture a growing in faith.

I personally believe that the New International Version translation got it right when it says from faith to faith, from first to last. In other words, right standing with God, being accepted by God is always through faith. You gain right standing with God by faith. You keep right standing with God by faith. The Christian life is faith from beginning to end, from start to finish.

You say, "Where does obedience come in regarding right standing with God?"

The answer is it doesn't come in. Obedience is shown the door. Keeping the commands is shown the door when it comes to right standing with God and keeping right standing with God. It is always only faith relying on what God has done. The only obedience that means anything regarding right standing with God is the obedience of Jesus Christ and his willingness to go to the cross for your sins. The only commandment keeping that we care about is the commandment keeping of Jesus Christ and the fact that he was the sinless Son of God who died for us. Faith relies on God and what God has done. Faith rests on God. Faith looks at God. It is faith that saves and faith that sustains.

Friends, you who have believed this message of the gospel, who have associated yourself with it, understand that no where, at no time, before any person or any group, do you ever need to be ashamed at what you have done when you decided to trust the gospel. And now you need to give it away because you are a debtor.

Let's pray.