

Righteous

Romans 16:1-27

Key Verse: 16:25-27

“Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.”

Today is our final sermon from the book of Romans. Who would have thought that we would be standing on this side of the book? It seemed so daunting when we were getting ready to start it. Does anybody remember when it was? We posted that question on Facebook on Friday to see if anyone would give an answer and no one was able to. We started the book of Romans on September 2, 2012 and this sermon is our 25th sermon from the book. That’s nearly half a year’s worth of God’s word. We entitled the entire series on Romans “Righteous” because one of the central themes of the book is righteousness is by faith in Christ alone. We are made righteous, or right with God, by God’s great and unfathomable grace to us, because he redeemed us through the blood of his son Jesus. When we believe what Jesus has done for us and accept God’s grace, we are declared by God to be righteous. It isn’t something that we earn by our actions; it is something that is given to us freely. With all this as our backdrop, it’s really strange that none of our sermons were ever called “Righteous”. Let’s change that today.

This is the conclusion of Paul’s letter to the Roman church. When we read through it, it probably seemed mostly like a list of greetings. He was saying hi to this person and hello to that person. But there is a lot in here. There are a lot of names and most of the people are unknown except for what Paul has written about them here. So then, let’s start off in the first couple of verses. “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.” (1-2) Paul is, here, talking about a woman named Phoebe who is a deacon in the church in Cenchreae. It is thought that Paul was writing this letter either from Corinth or Cenchreae, which are about six miles from one another. Corinth was the major city while Cenchreae was the port city nearby. Phoebe was a deacon, or servant, of the church. In the early church there were two main offices: elders and deacons. The elders were the preachers and pastors of the church, while the deacons were the people who were in charge of the day-to-day operations, like managing the treasury, distributing food, or maintaining the facilities. Phoebe was among the latter in the church and thus a highly respectable person. Paul asked the Roman church to receive her in the Lord, quite possibly because she was the person who would deliver the letter to the church there and Paul wanted to make sure that the people would treat her well because she was a benefactor to many people. She was a generous person who would help those who would be in need.

After this request, Paul proceeds to greet various people who were in Rome. He begins his greetings with, “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house.” (3-5) In the Bible, Acts 18 introduces us to Priscilla and Aquila. As that Scripture says, Paul met the married couple when he first came to Corinth. Priscilla and Aquila were Jews from Rome, but had to leave, because the emperor Claudius ordered all Jews out of the capital. They became good friends in the faith with Paul in Corinth and they worked together in many ways, including tent making. When Paul left Corinth for

Ephesus, the couple went with him and they stayed in Ephesus for a while, serving the church there. Apparently by this time, Priscilla and Aquila were able to return to Rome and a church began to meet in their house. This passage says that they risked the lives for Paul, but honestly we don't have any details about that.

Paul also greets four people who he calls "dear friends": Epenetus, who was the first Christian convert in the province of Asia, Ampliatus, Stachys and Persis (5,8,9,12). In the letter are also four women that Paul describes as working very hard: Mary (6), Tryphena and Tryphosa, who possibly were twins because of the alliteration of their names, and Persis (12). It is very interesting that the only people that Paul mentions are working very hard are women. My guess is that because of the cultural standing of women, these women were exceptional in the work for the Lord, so much so that Paul took note of their hard work. Also in Rome, there was Andronicus and Junia (7). These two were probably a husband and a wife and they shared in Paul's sufferings during one of his imprisonments, and they are unique to Paul because they were Christians before he was, which is amazing because Paul was converted within five years of Jesus' death and resurrection and by this time had been a Christian for over 20 years. Paul also greets two households, the household of Aristobulus (10) and the household of Narcissus (11). These were whole families that believed. Paul greeted Rufus, who was one of Simon of Cyrene's sons – the same Simon who carried Jesus' cross. And Paul greeted two other churches in Rome: one that included Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas and Hermas (14), and another that included Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas (15). That's a lot of people to remember, and quite honestly, it is amazing that Paul is able to remember to greet all of them. Although Paul had never gone to Rome, he knew a lot of people who were there, although I don't think that I would name any child of mine after them. However, Rufus might make a good dog's name.

Besides the people Paul knew in Rome, he also knew the type of people who would try to hinder the Lord's work. Paul wrote after his greetings, "I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." (17-19) As we heard in Romans before, there were people who wanted to add to the gospel. They maintained that, although Christ's blood did save them, they needed to follow certain rules and regulations in order to maintain their salvation. God would be more pleased with them if they made themselves more holy. They inferred that the gospel was not enough and shunned anyone who disagreed with them. These people were held in high regard, but Paul mentioned that people like that were not serving Jesus, but their own ambition. They sought power over others for themselves and manipulated God's word to serve their own desires. That sounds strange, but that type of person uses their silver tongue to tell people what they want. They say things like, "Buy this piece of cloth to pray with. When you hold it, God will really answer your prayers", or, "You're not good enough to go to heaven, right now. If you give us some money, we'll let you see this holy relic, and you can pray in front of it. We'll pray for you, too. Then God will shorten your time in purgatory, so you can go to heaven", or, "You are so holy to write a reflection every week. You will be so great because of what you did."

But to such thoughts, Paul writes, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you." (20) When you read through the passage, verse

20 seems to come out of nowhere. He's warning the Romans about deceptive people and then he suddenly says that the God of peace will crush Satan under their feet. He's writing this to show that it is Satan that tries to deceive them, but that God is ultimately in control. This is the only time in all of Romans that Satan is mentioned. It would seem that with such an important topic like righteousness that Satan's deception should be mentioned well before this point, but here it is. Satan is only mentioned here because for the great power of the second part of the verse, "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you." Satan's attack is to tell us that we are not worth anything and do not deserve God's love. Satan tells us that we have to do more and try harder to gain God's favor. This is a sentiment that is echoed in every religion on the planet, save the one God established. Satan tells us that we are evil and we have to do so much good to become right. Satan tells us that God is disappointed in us and could never love someone who is clueless about the direction of their life, but Jesus gives his grace. That seems very strange, but God's grace is what the book of Romans has been about this entire time. By God's grace alone, through Christ alone, we are saved, we are righteous, and we are God's children. Satan tells us that we have to do everything, but Jesus tells us that he has already done it all. We are evil, but Jesus declares us good. You, who are dirty, are clean because Jesus declares it. You are great, not because of what you did, but because of what Jesus did. In the end, we have to make a choice. We can either listen to the deceiver or listen to the truth, and what Jesus says is the truth. You are either condemned or redeemed.

At this point in the letter, Paul switches from greeting people in Rome to passing on the greetings of those who are with him. The first person he mentions is Timothy. Timothy was like a son to Paul. He was from modern-day Turkey and traveled with Paul quite a bit. His mother and grandmother were believers and he became the main church leader in Ephesus, who helped to appoint elders and deacons of the church. Paul also mentions Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, Jews who were converts to Christ. Also, Tertius, the scribe who wrote down the letter for Paul sent his greeting. Plus, Gaius, Paul's host greeted them, along with Erastus, who was the city's director of public works. A government official was among the family of believers, and there is actually proof that Erastus existed. Archaeologists found a stone in Corinth with the name Erastus inscribed on it and it mentions that Erastus paid for the construction of a road out of his own money, which holds with the thought of being the director of public works. Lastly, Paul mentions that Quartus sends his greetings as well.

At the very end, the letter is concluded with these words, "Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen." (25-27) That's a strange and packed verse where Paul ascribes glory to God. "To him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel." Paul is pointing the Romans to God who is able to firmly place the gospel in the hearts of those who believe. Paul calls it his gospel, meaning it was the gospel that he was proclaiming about Jesus. He speaks of a mystery. He uses that term rather often in his letters. He referred to it in his letters to the Corinthians, Ephesians and Colossians, but he says it best in his letter to Timothy, "Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory." (1 Timothy 3:16) The mystery that Paul speaks of was Christ himself. We've mentioned it before, but there are hundreds of prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament. There were things written hundreds and

thousands of years before Jesus walked this earth. Some of them seemed to contradict each other and it was a great mystery in how it would all play out. Scripture said that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem, come out of Egypt and be from Galilee. You would think that someone could only come from one place, but Christ fulfills them all. He was born in Bethlehem, but had to flee to Egypt when King Herod wanted to kill all the boys under the age of two years in Bethlehem. After Herod died, his family moved to Galilee, where he grew up. Jesus fulfills the entire mystery.

It was a mystery to know how God was going to save the whole world. How could God, who is just, redeem the whole corrupt world by showing his grace to it, while maintaining his justice? As we heard at Easter a couple of weeks ago, Jesus took our place. He was the sacrificial lamb, who stood in our place for the atonement of our sins. His blood took the place of our blood. Justice was served through the grace of Christ. It is something that doesn't make any sense until God shows you the truth. What Jesus did seems like folly and madness until God reveals the intricacies of his plan. And that plan included the salvation of the Gentiles along with the Jews. The Jews were God's chosen people, but God's saving grace extends to those who weren't of Jewish descent.

Paul writes that the mystery was revealed so that the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith. The thought that the Gentiles would come to the obedience that comes from faith is a term that might sound familiar. Paul uses it at the beginning of Romans in 1:5, "Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake." Paul wrote that it was his mission and the mission of all the Roman Christians to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. It is interesting to note that the obedience that he mentions here comes from faith. Obedience wasn't something that was to be shoved down someone's throat. There was no one wringing someone's arm saying, "Obey me." The obedience that Paul refers to in Romans 1 and in this passage is one that comes from faith, meaning that it is a response to the grace that is given. You obey not because you have to or you will be punished, but because you want to since you love Jesus. You listen not because you are afraid, but because you are in love. If I yell at my daughter Ella to do something, she becomes afraid and cries, but if I ask politely, she is very willing because she loves me. Every time we leave the house, I ask Ella to get certain shoes ready, and she pulls the right ones out and puts the wrong ones back on the shelf. She does that joyfully because of her love.

It is to this God that Paul says should be glorified forever through Jesus Christ. We glory in God because he is the only one that is due glory. None of us is worthy of anything that deserves glory. Paul quoted back in chapter 3 that "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God." (Romans 3:10-11) To be righteous means to be right with God or that God calls us right. The way we live is the right way to live. However, Paul says that no one is righteous because there is no one who is living the right way. Paul explains why in Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The standard for a right life is very high. The example is lofty, so lofty that we can never achieve it by our own efforts, because the standard is God himself, and who is like God? You might think pretty highly of yourself. You haven't murdered anybody...probably. You come to church. You're nice to other people. You give to the poor and needy. You even share Jesus with other people. That's pretty good, don't you think? Now compare yourself to God. Are you up to his standards? Be honest, now. You might be able to make dinner, but God made the

universe. You will never measure up to God because you are not God and that makes you a sinner, not worthy of any glory.

But Jesus did do something that is deserving of glory and that is to save us from our unrighteousness. Let's go back to Romans 3:23 and read the next verse also, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:23-24) As I have mentioned before and we hear a lot, Jesus came to redeem us. He justifies us by his grace through the price that was paid on the cross. When it says that all are justified, it means that everyone who believes Jesus is declared right. It is not something that we can obtain, Jesus just says it and it is so. That sounds a little like creation. God just spoke creation into being. He said, "Let there be light," and then there was light. It just existed. If God says something, then it is true because he has the power to back up his claims. If he says that you are living the right way, then you are regardless of how sinful you still feel. It's not a blank check on your salvation. It doesn't mean that you can freely sin and that your sinful way is right. It is a declaration that wipes the slate clean and because the burden of sin is lifted, you can freely by faith obey God. When you accept that grace, it leads you to obey not out of fear but out of love.

The result is nothing less than astounding. When God declares us righteous, then great things begin to happen. Look back in this chapter to all the names. Paul has something good to say about each and every one of them. Some risked their lives for him. Others shared in his imprisonment. Others, still, treated Paul like family and he regarded them as much. Churches were worshipping in homes. One person's hospitality was shared to the whole church. These things don't happen very often. It is a beautiful sight. There is no mention of begrudging or ill will, just grace overflowing with grace. Although Paul never went to Rome, he knew so many people there, who went to share the grace that was given to them. Look around this room, like the church in Rome, this is God's church. We are all called righteous by God's great grace through Jesus. His grace should be overflowing from one to another, and in many cases it is here. There are many tales of grace in our church. Right now two of our members drove all night from Chicago to Washington, D.C. to help one person determine God's plan for his life. That's only by grace. However, there are other areas that grace is lacking. There are so many problems and issues all over the place, but honestly, we are many times so caught up in our own problems that we don't show grace to each other. There is much uncertainty and pain and hardship that affects almost everyone here. Everybody has a story, but our prayer and knowledge of these issues is limited. Sometimes people don't find out about hardship until months afterwards. Encouragement and reminders of God's grace and love are overshadowed by our efforts to solve the problem, which might not be what is needed at that time, because solutions might sound like judgment to someone in hardship, especially if they do not feel your love.

I know that is true because I am that way on both sides of the coin. I won't accept advice from people who really don't care or take the time to understand. It feels like those people just want to make themselves look right. They want to hear themselves talk and they want to receive honor for helping. I don't want anything to do with you. Ironically, I come across that exact same way to others, uncaring and just blustering advice for its own sake. God's grace should penetrate far beyond that. I look at this chapter and I see God's righteousness in every person that is named. Some people are of renown, like Priscilla and Aquila or Erastus, but most of the people are unknown. Yet, they are named by God and shown to be righteous

through Jesus. We don't have to do great things to be righteous, but God calls us righteous and he makes us great.

Here's pop quiz: who is righteous? Certainly we aren't by our own efforts. Only God is truly righteous, and only God is worthy of glory, honor and praise. Through Jesus, we share in God's righteousness; it is imparted to us. With that righteousness given to us by grace we are able to obey God's through faith, and not by our efforts. With that, God's grace overflows from our souls to those around us. We want to help and remind others of the gospel. We want to share with them the grace that was given us, so that they may know the joy that we experience in our lives of faith. Our God is righteous and so are we, because, through Jesus' blood shed on the cross, God declares it us as righteous. Praise God!