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The Heart
of the Gospel

ROMANS

I-IV

Romans

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The Heart of the Gospel

by John H. Munro

Martin Luther called Romans “the very purest Gospel.” I agree. It is the Gospel “of God” and concerns God’s Son. This is good news! In the first four chapters, Paul presents “The Heart of the Gospel.” How important it is that we understand the biblical Gospel.

Because of the deceitfulness and hatred of the devil, we should not be too surprised when there are attacks on the Gospel. In Galatians, Paul emphasizes that this Gospel “is not man’s gospel” but received “through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” Therefore, if anyone preaches a contrary gospel, they are under a curse! There are always those who distort the Gospel of Christ.

DISTORTIONS OF THE GOSPEL

One of the contemporary distortions of the Gospel is that it is only one belief of many. As long as we are sincere, kind, and help others, it doesn’t really matter what we believe. Another distortion of the Gospel — and a very popular one — is the “prosperity gospel.” I am sure you’ve heard it from some TV preachers who spread their false message to millions. If we accept this gospel (which, of course, is no gospel at all), we will be successful, wealthy, healthy, and feel tremendous about ourselves! In this way, Jesus is presented as a therapist who makes you feel good about yourself, or a guru who unlocks your secret potential, or a coach who ensures that you fulfill your own dreams.

In some contemporary evangelical churches, lip service is paid to the biblical Gospel, but in practice, the church becomes a mirror of the surrounding pop culture causing confusion and error. All these false “gospels” are self-centered, self-serving, self-actualized, self-reliant and ultimately self-destructive rather than being Christ-centered and God-glorifying. In these false gospels, there is little or no mention of sin, repentance, or the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in our souls.

CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

Central to the true Gospel is the cross of Christ. That God-given message can never be changed or repackaged to make it more palatable to people. If this is done, the power of the Gospel disappears and in its place arises a weak cultural Christianity which is no gospel at all.

The Evangelical Manifesto (May 7, 2008) stated it this way:

“All too often we have trumpeted the Gospel of Jesus, but we have replaced biblical truths with therapeutic techniques, worship with entertainment, discipleship with growth in human potential, church growth with business entrepreneurialism, concern for the church and for the local congregation with expressions of the faith that are churchless and little better than a vapid spirituality, meeting real needs with pandering to felt needs, and mission principles with marketing precepts. In the process we have become known for commercial, diluted, and feel-good gospels of health, wealth, human potential, and religious happy talk, each of which is indistinguishable from the passing fashions of the surrounding world.”

We must therefore be vigilant against these false gospels. Our study in the book of Romans provides an infallible guide as Paul presents “The Heart of the Gospel.” This magnificent epistle has the Gospel as its theme. At the beginning of Romans, Paul states his personal commitment to and passion for the Gospel. 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 to faith, as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith” (1:16–17).

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

After Paul's introduction in Romans 1:1–17, he begins his majestic exposition of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It may shock the contemporary reader that Paul begins his presentation of the Gospel not with affirming God has a wonderful plan for our lives or we are wonderful people. He begins with the wrath of God which is “revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (1:18). To a contemporary audience, that seems a very negative, judgmental, critical, and not particularly helpful beginning! And therein lies our problem. Before we embrace our Lord Jesus Christ, we must understand that without exception all of us have a tremendous problem: we are sinful and unrighteous in the presence of a holy God.

In the opening chapters, Paul first deals with the pagan (1:19–32), then with those who look on themselves as moral people (2:1–16), and then with the Jewish person (2:17–29). All of them have this in common: all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (3:23). Every person without exception is under the condemnation of God and deserves His wrath. Paul therefore makes it very clear that our deepest problem is that we are fallen people. At its root is a form of pride where we refuse to glorify God and seek to go our own way. So, the opening chapters of Romans may present a gloomy picture, but it is a very realistic one. And it is absolutely essential we understand who we are in the sight of God. Unless we understand the bad news regarding ourselves, we will never understand or turn to the good news of Jesus Christ. In other words, if our diagnosis of the problem is wrong, we will seek a false remedy. So as Paul begins his exposition of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he first affirms the reality and the universality of sin. Then he expounds the power and the purpose of God revealed in the Gospel as the only way to deal with this deep problem of sin.

THE GOOD NEWS

In Romans 3:21–31, Paul brilliantly presents the good news of Jesus Christ. Repeatedly he emphasizes that our justification before God is not based on anything we do but rather that it flows from the grace of God. So we are declared righteous before a holy God (justified) by grace alone through faith alone

because of Christ alone. We are “justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (3:24).

JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

In chapter four, Paul then presents illustrations of those who have been justified by faith apart from works. His two great examples are Abraham who lived before the Mosaic law and King David who lived after the giving of the Mosaic law. Both Abraham and David were justified by faith. Abraham did many good things, but he was not justified because of his innate goodness or because of his good deeds. He was justified by faith: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (4:3).

So justification is not something we work towards, but rather it is a gift of God we receive through faith. This grace is the opposite of the popular “God helps those who help themselves” concept. We do not deserve God’s salvation — it is by grace alone. The price for our sins has been paid (3:24). Now God does not take our sins into account. Salvation is received by us through faith alone.

Martin Luther made it clear that “the Gospel lies entirely outside of you.” By this, he meant that Christ and not ourselves has accomplished our salvation. Paul explains that the way of salvation points to Christ alone. Faith is the empty hand outstretched receiving the grace of God. 🙏

“This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul.”



MARTIN LUTHER

FOR THE WORD OF GOD AND THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS CHRIST

REVELATION 1:9

