

A Faith Unashamed  
Romans 1:8-17

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*For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.* Rom. 1:16

There were Christians in Rome who were critical of Paul. He had not yet come to Rome with his gospel. He had been everywhere else, they said, but not Rome. They were starting to think Paul lacked the courage of his convictions. He could play the big man in the lesser cities and in the outlying districts but not in Rome: that sophisticated city, that capital of the empire and seat of government, that hub of intrigue and influence. He does alright elsewhere, but he can't bring himself to run with the big dogs. Such was the criticism. Paul, they said, had not come to Rome because he was intimidated and afraid; he was ashamed of the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Paul takes up the challenge right at the start of his Letter to the Romans. At least four times in the first full paragraph of the body of the letter Paul says he has been trying to get to Rome all along but one thing or another has stopped him. He makes clear that timidity has had nothing to do with it. He roars back, "I am not ashamed of the gospel."

I want this attitude of Paul's to be at the forefront of your soul and mine. Let it be said of us that we are not ashamed of the gospel. Let us hold our faith humbly always yet without embarrassment.

*Let's be unashamed of the gospel's claims.* This is the doctrinal side of the gospel, its beliefs.

Let us be unashamed of the claim that God is real. God is no imaginary friend made up centuries ago in the world's childhood. God is real and really present as an active and independent agent in the world today. We don't know all that God is. We don't know all that God is doing. We shouldn't pretend we know. But neither should we be embarrassed to profess that against the background of all that tosses and turns in this world there is God, a supernatural being of goodness and light, the Creator of the ends of the earth, the Sustainer of time and space, the Intervener in the affairs of people and nations, the Love Divine, all loves excelling, who is our daily, hourly Companion. Let's not be ashamed of that claim that God is real.

Let's not be ashamed of the claim that Jesus is alive. There really lived once upon this earth a man named Jesus of Nazareth and he lived at the time the Bible says he lived. Meticulous and responsible historical research can access that fact. It has yet and may never get to all the facts about the historical life of Jesus, but it can get to him.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is no character of fiction. And once more, he is no character simply of the past. He lives today. That is a spiritual claim beyond the reach of historical study's meticulous evidentiary methods; but it is a fact known to faith by

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<sup>1</sup> Clarence E. Macartney, *The Greatest Texts of the Bible* (1947, rpt.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> See Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

way of reason and experience. Jesus died on that cross at Calvary and yet he rose on Easter Day. It's not just that his ideas and principles and teachings caught on. He himself rose from the dead. He lives. Christ Jesus is no fictional character, no dead hero; he is a living presence today. Let's not be ashamed of gospel's claim that Jesus is alive.

Let's not be ashamed of the claim that scripture and prayer put us in touch with God and with this Living Christ. The Bible is a book to be studied like every other book. It is to be questioned. It is to be analyzed. It is to be seen as a product of its time. It is to be understood that its authors were people like us; they were now and again amazed, now and again confused, now and again quite wrong, and now and again brilliant beyond their means in analysis and interpretation. God did not put their words on their pages but God uses the words on their pages to speak to us and make himself known today. God speaks to us through the Bible, and we speak to God through prayer.<sup>3</sup> Through prayer we can make our wants and wishes known, our doubts and our fears, our hopes and our dreams, our frustrations and our sorrows. And God hears them all. This interplay of scripture and prayer isn't the whole of our communication with God but it is essential to our communion with God. Let's not be ashamed to say it: scripture and prayer put us in touch with the Living God and the Living Jesus.

Let's not be ashamed of the claim that the church is God's chosen vessel for work in the world today. Let's be careful not to be exclusive about that claim. I don't mean to suggest the church is God's only means of working in today's world. I don't mean to suggest that one denomination – certainly not our own – has favored status in the eyes of God. I don't even mean to suggest that God's work is limited to the boundaries of Christianity and Christians. But let's not so avoid exclusivity that we miss particularity. God does work in and through the church. The church is weak and flawed and foolish at times; the Christianity of Christians has been less than Christian. Still God has set the divine name on the church and seeks to use it even today in ministries of justice, peace, and righteousness. Let's be critical of the church by all means, ever assessing it against what we have come to know about God, but let's not back off the idea God can use today's church for good.

Let's not be ashamed of the gospel's claims. That's its doctrinal side.

*Let's not be ashamed of the gospel's commands.* This is the ethical side of the gospel, its prophetic witness.

Let's not be ashamed of the command that we care for the poor. There is a secular and selfish spirit running through our culture that looks upon poverty as somebody's misfortune but not society's responsibility. Under this point of view, the poor, if they are given anything at all, have to earn it to show they deserve it; even then they are given but dribs and drabs. This point of view speaks of the wealthy as the blessed and the fortunate. Christians are meant to speak up against that point of view and give voice to the command that these poor are our brothers and sisters and we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We have responsibility to care for them, to see that they be helped monetarily, legislatively, systemically. Let's not be embarrassed to voice that command.

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<sup>3</sup> Donald K. McKim, *Everyday Prayer with the Reformers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2020), p. 61. McKim attributes this thought to Edwin Sandys (1519-1588).

Let's not be ashamed of the command that we care for the planet. Even climate change deniers are under the command of the gospel to be stewards of the earth who take care of it for the sake of the next generations and who do not simply take from it for the profit of this generation. Let's not be too embarrassed to voice that command.

Let's not be ashamed of the command that we treat all people as though they were Christ himself. Because all life matters and because Black life is repeatedly treated as if it does not matter "Black Lives Matter" is a gospel refrain. "As you do it to the least of these," said Jesus – to the powerless and poor – "you do it unto me." (cf. Mt. 25:40) The only person you can put a choke hold on is Jesus. Let's not be afraid of that message or too embarrassed voice that command.

Let's not be ashamed of the gospel's commands. That's its ethical side, its prophetic witness.

*Let's not be ashamed of the gospel's consolations.* This is the pastoral side of the gospel, its word of comfort.

This may be the most needful area now. Our people and many, if not all, those we encounter know the right thing to do as far as justice is concerned; but life has them burdened with a back-breaking load. Their shoulders are so pressed to the grindstone of their own lives that they have little time or strength to look up to God and out to others. They believe in that, but they are worn and more than half worn out.

Let's not be ashamed, then, to tell of God's comfort for the weary. Weariness may be the most widespread diagnosis of our time. People are tired. They are tired of the news. They are tired of the pandemic. They are tired working from home. They are tired of wearing masks. They are tired of being separated. They are tired of living in the fear that nothing may change. They are tired of the fear that change may come too late. The gospel has a word to the weary, and the weary need Christians who believe in God's word to the weary and who are unashamed to offer it.

Let's not be ashamed to tell of God's comfort for the grieving and the dying. The damnable thing about this pandemic is that so many people are dying and so many are dying in isolation with only strangers near. The dearest with whom one has walked through life are kept at a distance – no last kiss, no last touch, no last word. The aloneness is like a second death right alongside the virus. The gospel has a word for that. Nobody dies alone, and nobody dies into an abyss of nothingness. I don't know who all the angels are who hover round a bed of suffering unto death, but there is an abiding sacredness. No one dies alone, and those who close their eyes in death open them in glory. I do not believe in the resurrection of *this* body but I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Let's not be embarrassed to say that and to share God's word of comfort for the grieving and the dying.

Let's not be ashamed to tell of God's comfort for those who suffer in any way. Paul opened his Second Letter to the Corinthians saying, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which

we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Cor. 1:3-4 rsv) Long before Paul said that, Isaiah heard God call out, “Comfort, O comfort my people!” (Is. 40:1) Let’s not be too embarrassed by that word of comfort to speak it to a soul in need.

Let’s not be ashamed of the gospel’s consolations. That’s its pastoral side, its ministry of comfort.

Well, we could go on to speak of the gospel’s evangelistic side, its educational side, its devotional side, its eschatological side and others, but you get the lines of my thought and are able to trace them in the necessary directions. It’s enough now to have spoken of the gospel’s doctrinal, ethical, and pastoral sides, its claims, commands, and comforts.

The purpose of a sermon like this to work at preparing us in the theological best practices that are needed both now and when we are able to re-enter our church’s full schedule of in-person worship, education, fellowship, and mission. Kathy Hauser’s excellent leadership has been guiding us in thinking of the social precautions and protocols we will need to have in place before we re-enter our full schedule. This sermon looks at one of the spiritual best practices we shall need to have in place if our church is to be healthy and strong now and in the long term. We need to have a faith unashamed.

A faith that is embarrassed by its own creed, timid around its creeds and confessions, is too loosely held to have any impact or influence. It is too hesitant to speak truth to power, too shaky in its knees to do any teaching, too removed from life to be relevant to any pressing matter, and too hidden to inspire anyone to want it for themselves.

So let’s practice a faith unashamed. Let’s not be ashamed of the gospel – its claims, its commands, or its consolations – and we will find it to be what Paul said it is – the power of God.