

Church family, I'm grateful for this opportunity to speak to all six of our campuses today. And I want to invite you to keep your Bibles open at Romans chapter 1. Our mission at The Orchard is to glorify God by growing in faith, hope, and love **through the gospel of Jesus Christ**. As we enter a new ministry year, this is the goal we want to pursue in all that we do. And today, I want to speak especially about those last six words: *through the gospel of Jesus Christ*. Here at The Orchard, in Sunday worship and Sunday school, at LIFE Groups and on global ministry trips, in everything we do... We want to keep the gospel as our unwavering focus. Because if we drift from the gospel at all, we are setting ourselves up for big problems.

Consider a group of astronauts taking off to reach the moon. How do they chart their course? It might seem simple. After all, we can see the moon with our own eyes. Just aim the rocket and go, right? Well, you know it's way more complicated than that. I won't pretend to understand all the math and physics involved, but the experts planning the mission have to consider a wide variety of factors: gravity, orbit, rocket velocity and so on. And, because the moon is 239,000 miles away, a trajectory off by even a single degree would cause the spacecraft to miss by thousands of miles.

As a church we are aimed at growing in faith, hope, and love. But if our trajectory is off, if we drift away at all from pursuing this goal *through the gospel*, we're going to end up somewhere we never intended to go. Instead of faith, we'll slip into self-reliance. Instead of hope, we'll risk drowning in despair. Instead of love, we'll grow cold and callous toward God and others. We don't want that! So, we need to keep the gospel at the center of our worship as a church and at the center of our witness in this world. That's what we find in the verses we're looking at today.

Let's take those two goals one at a time. First...

1. The centrality of the gospel in our worship

We're only a few minutes into this message, but someone might be wondering, "What is the gospel?" We'll get there in a second, but first, let me tell you what I mean by worship. I do mean singing, which I find is the most common way people often define worship. But I also mean so much more. Worship, real worship, is the overflow of a heart captivated by the glory and grace of God. It comes out in our singing, for sure, but also in our praying, our reading and our responding to the Word. And worship is not something exclusively limited to worship services.

As Paul says in Romans chapter 12, everything we do with our bodies, everything we do in this life, is to be carried out as an act of worship to God... our eating, our working, our playing, our resting, when done with thanksgiving and praise in a way that honors the Lord, is worship. Worship is the overflow of a heart captivated by the glory and grace of God. And nothing fuels worship like the gospel. So, what is the gospel? The word gospel means good news. It's a message, and it was the message at the heart of Paul's ministry. Listen to what he says in Romans 1, verse 16: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek* (Romans 1:16).

Ministry was not easy for Paul. On multiple occasions he was mocked and belittled, beaten and imprisoned, and in the end, he was killed, for the sake of gospel. But he is not ashamed. He has no regrets. He is totally committed to this message. Why? Because the gospel is the power of

God for salvation to everyone who believes, including Jews to whom the message came first, and Greeks—and every other gentile nation—where the message spread. Notice, the gospel does not merely **describe** the power of God. It **is** the power of God! The gospel makes things happen. The gospel is not like a car's owner manual, which merely describes the horsepower of the engine. The gospel is like the engine itself. It is a potent message, a living and active word, bringing about salvation to everyone who believes.

How does it do this? Look at verse 17: *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith"* (Romans 1:17). The gospel reveals the righteousness of God. Now, depending on what Paul means by "the righteousness of God," this could either be the most comforting or the most terrifying message you've ever heard. No one understood this better than Martin Luther. Many of us know Martin Luther as the mighty reformer of the 16th century, standing boldly and unashamed for the gospel in his day, much like Paul in the 1st century. But what you may not know is that for many years Martin Luther was a deeply troubled man. He was racked by a profound sense of guilt before God, and he was acutely aware of his inability to earn God's favor. He felt this, even though he was a monk! A seriously committed religious man.

He did everything he could think of to calm his conscience: confessing sins, performing penance, taking pilgrimages. But none of it worked. Why? What was his hang up? Romans 1:17! Listen to his own words... "I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "The [righteousness] of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him."¹

Think about what he's saying. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God. But if the righteousness of God simply refers to the justice of God in punishing the unjust, this is not good news for us! Because we are the unjust! As Paul says in Romans 3, we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glorious standards. And Luther thought, "I don't need any more reminders of the justice of God in punishing the unjust. I know this well and I cannot find any way to alleviate my fears!"

Maybe you know that feeling. You are racked by guilt. You know you cannot earn God's favor. And you cannot find anything to calm your conscience. Well, listen to what Luther discovered. He says, "Night and day I pondered until... I grasped that the [righteousness] of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "[righteousness] of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven."²

¹ Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 48.

² Ibid, 48.

The gospel message has the power to save sinners, because it reveals the righteousness of God. Which not only refers to the righteousness God himself possesses, but also, the righteousness God freely bestows upon all who believe in Jesus! This is the doctrine of justification. Paul states it very clearly in Romans 3:23-24, when he says, *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified [made righteous!] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus* (Romans 3:23-24). There's more we could say about the gospel than this, but not less!

This is the good news! In a gift of his grace, through no work or effort on our part, God makes us righteous! How? Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus! Christ, who died upon a cross to take our sin upon himself. Christ, who rose again, and now lives to give his perfect righteousness to everyone who believes in him. Luther called this the great exchange! And when you see it, you have found a gate to heaven! Literally, heaven is open to you, and you are delivered from the hell you deserve. But also, day by day, you will find the joys of heaven flooding into your mind and your heart.

That's why verse 17 says, *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith"* (Romans 1:17). Paul says this gift of righteousness revealed in the gospel is from faith for faith. By which he means, it is a gift received by faith and enjoyed by faith. And he backs that up with a quotation from the Old Testament prophet, "The righteous shall live by faith," where the word "live" refers to an ongoing, persistent reality.

Church, here's what this means:

- The gospel is not only the source of justification when we first believe.
- The gospel is the source of joy throughout our entire lives!

We live by it, the way we live by food! I'm not living today from food I ate 20 years ago. I'm living off the food I ate today! So, if you've never believed the gospel, the good news that God makes sinners righteous by grace through faith in Jesus, believe today, and live! And if you put your faith in Jesus 20 years ago, believe the gospel today, and live! Let the glorious grace of God in Christ fill you up with fresh joy. Let it captivate your heart, so that you might overflow with praise, with worship! From the songs we sing and the prayers when we gather like this, to all the ministry we engage throughout the week, into every aspect of our lives, let's keep the gospel central in our minds and our hearts. It is the power of God, the engine that will propel all our worship!

And let's keep the gospel central in our witness.

2. The centrality of the gospel in our witness

What's wrong with the world? If you ever want to liven up a discussion with your family, friends, or coworkers, toss that question out the next time you're together. What's wrong with the world? Depending on who you ask, you'll get a variety of answers. Some will point to our politics, others to the economy, others to sliding moral values. Some will talk about evil nations, terrorist organizations, or other bad actors on the global scene. The list is endless, but here's one answer I don't think you'll hear. I don't think anyone will say "nothing." I've never met anyone

who thinks nothing is wrong with this world. We all know things are not how they should be. The question is, “Why?” And there are many legitimate answers. But the Bible cuts through it all and takes us to the ultimate underlying answer.

As we look at verse 18-23, we could sum it up in 2 words: suppression and idolatry. Let’s start with suppression. Follow Paul’s argument beginning in verse 18: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth* (Romans 1:18). God looks out on this world and he is not pleased. He is full of wrath—his appropriate, just anger. Why? Because he sees ungodliness and unrighteousness. People do not revere him as they should. In fact, they rebel against him. And all the while, they are suppressing the truth. Verses 19-20: *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse* (Romans 1:19-20).

This summer, like many of you, our family took some time for vacation. We enjoyed a week at Lake Michigan where every night, we stood outside to watch the sunset. And we were not alone. All along the beach, people set up chairs and blankets, to take in the pink and amber hues that marked the end of the day. And what were they seeing in this brilliant display? The eternal power and divine nature of God. That’s what Paul is saying! He is saying, our world and everything in it, along with the entirety of creation, the moon the stars, the vast expanse of the entire universe, it’s all the visible disclosure of the invisible God. God made it all.

And then, to borrow a phrase from John Calvin, God put humanity inside “this most glorious theater to be a spectator.”³ But what do we do with this revelation of power and divinity? We suppress it. We push it down. We observe a thousand wonders every day in the created order around us. We gaze at the heavens, but we ignore the Creator. Some do this willfully. Like the atheist who declares for all to hear, “I don’t believe in God!” Many do this subconsciously, not even aware that it’s happening. Theologian Johan Bavinck says, “Man has repressed the truth of the everlasting power and the divinity of God. It has been exiled to his unconscious, to the crypts of his existence.” And in God’s place, idols creep in.

Look at verses 21-23: *For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things* (Romans 1:21-23). We were made to worship. And if we don’t worship God, we will worship something else. That’s idolatry. It doesn’t require a statue or a physical image. An idol is anything that receives our ultimate devotion, trust, and praise. And Paul says that idolatry is folly.

He does not mean that non-Christians are unintelligent. I know many unbelievers who are way, way smarter than me! But exchanging the glory, the immortal God for an idol is not wise. In fact, it’s what’s wrong with the world! Tim Keller writes, “Idolatry is not only one sin among many, but what is fundamentally wrong with the human heart.”⁴ He argues that this is why in the first of the

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 1, Chapter 6.

⁴ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 165

10 Commandments God says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Why does God start there? Keller writes, “Because... we never break the other commandments without breaking the first one. Why do we fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is ‘because we are weak and sinful,’ but the specific answer in any actual circumstance is that there is something you feel you *must* have to be happy, something that is more important to your heart than God himself. We would not lie unless we first had made something—human approval, reputation, power over others, financial advantage—more important and valuable to our hearts than the grace and favor of God.”

Therefore, Keller says, “The secret to change is to identify and dismantle the counterfeit gods of your heart.”⁵ How do you do that? How do you identify an idol? Or a potential idol? Well, ask yourself, “If I’m really honest, where have I put my ultimate devotion, trust, and praise?” What am I living for? What gets my attention? My money? My affection? What, if taken away, would drive me into anger and despair from which I might not recover? We need to identify the idols we are prone to set up. And then we need to dismantle these counterfeit gods. How do we do that? Well, this is where we need the power of the gospel! Because when we see the glory and the grace offered to us in Jesus Christ, and believe this good news, the idols will fall and Christ will take his rightful place within our hearts.

Now, church, there are implications here for the idols that continue to creep into our own hearts. But right now, I want you to think of what all this means for our witness in this world. We are living in a world full of people in a perilous position. They are suppressing the truth and setting up idols. And if they do not turn to Jesus, they will face God’s wrath. How can we help? Let me offer three applications:

- pay attention,
- proclaim,
- and pray.

First, as you talk with unbelieving family and friends, pay attention to moments when the suppression becomes less subconscious and more obvious. Again, Johan Bavinck says, “Man has repressed the truth of the everlasting power and the divinity of God. It has been exiled to his unconscious, to the crypts of his existence.” But listen to what he says next, “That does not mean... that it has vanished forever. Still active, it reveals itself again and again.”

When might that happen? When might someone have a sense of God’s reality? Well, maybe in the sense of awe they experience as they watch a sunset or look out on some other stunning scene in creation, or enchantment as they take in a beautiful piece of art, or curiosity at a worship service, or fear because of some brush with morality. Pay attention in these moments and draw attention to what’s happening. You might say, “This sense of wonder and transcendence, where do you think that comes from?” And as you listen, take the opportunity to proclaim!

Tell them the truth about God, and the truth about his grace. Tell them that our biggest problems come from ignoring the One who made this world. That in his place we have given our hearts to

⁵ Ibid, 166.

things that can never save us or satisfy us. But Jesus can. He can cleanse our guilt, make us righteous in God's sight, and lead us into everlasting life! Be unashamed of the gospel! It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. So, pay attention. Proclaim. And pray. Pray that the gospel might land with power in their hearts, dismantling idols and fostering authentic worship!

Brothers and sisters, there are so many problems in this world, which means there are many good things we can do in this world. But let's always remember, there are some things that only we can do. No one else will proclaim the gospel. This is our God-given task, and this is our great privilege. Let's never lose sight of it.

Conclusion

Here at The Orchard, our mission is to glorify God by growing in faith, hope, and love through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is our unwavering focus, because the gospel is the engine that fuels our worship. When we see the riches of God's grace, who sent his son to die in our place, who covers us with his righteousness, we will glorify God!

We will glorify him with faith... no longer depending on our efforts to earn his favor but depending wholly upon his mercy.

We will glorify him with our hope... confidently anticipating the day when our risen and reigning Savior will return.

And we will glorify him with our love... loving him and loving others, because he first loved us.

A life steeped in the truth of the gospel will be a life growing in faith, hope, and love. We want this for ourselves. And we want this for more people in our world. So, we pay attention, watching for opportunities to proclaim the gospel. And we pray that God might bring light to darkened hearts, dismantling idols and saving sinners, to the praise of his glorious grace.