

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Lesson 4, Chapter 1 continued 2

While we won't spend as long in every chapter, chapter 1 of Romans has so many important terms and God-principles in it that it is necessary to go slow and to carefully clarify these terms and flesh out these principles. Then we'll have a far better basis for understanding what God, through Paul, is telling us.

We are going to spend most of this lesson looking at but one word: righteous. I have so much to say to you today about that term and what it means that we won't review last week's lesson except to say that verses 16 and 17 outline the theme not just for chapter 1 but for the entire Book of Romans. What Paul says in those 2 verses essentially defines his basic understanding of his Messianic faith and especially so when it comes to the role of the word righteous or righteousness. While several of the terms he uses to express his faith understanding are commonly used in Christianity, I think if I asked most of you to explain them I would get silence or a startled look. I don't fault you for that; most Bible scholars glide right by those terms without bothering to define them either. And those scholars who do define those terms don't necessarily agree with one another. So this is my way of saying to you that this is another of those worms that we're going to allow to crawl out from our can of worms before we carefully close the lid back.....for the time being.

Open your Bibles to Romans 1 and we're going to read verses 16 and 17.

Romans 1:16-17 CJB ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the Good News, since it is God's powerful means of bringing salvation to everyone who keeps on trusting, to the Jew especially, but equally to the Gentile.

¹⁷ For in it is revealed how God makes people righteous in his sight; and from beginning to end it is through trust- as the Tanakh puts it, "But the person who is righteous will live his life by trust."

There's that word "righteous" that we'll focus on today. Let me begin by saying that as fond as I am of the CJB, in verse 17 too much liberty has been taken with the original Greek and it has created a poor translation that leads us off in the wrong direction. I'll give you a much better translation shortly but first let's take a short detour. Although I've discussed Bible versions and translations with you before, it probably makes sense for me to say it again: there is no such thing as the one best, most accurate, Bible version. And the main reason I say this is because any version we read in English is more than a translation; it is necessarily a redaction due to the translation process. A translator's job is to make the meaning of the Scriptures in their original language understandable to English speakers (or in whatever language they are translating in to). Therefore they must make choices about what English words to use and often those choices consciously or unconsciously reflect personal theological viewpoints, biases, and cultural norms. I'm sorry, but in the end if you want obtain the most

accurate possible Bible version, you have to use the original language manuscripts. Of course very few people are true language scholars; it is a full time vocation preceded by many years of University preparation. But there are some wonderful Bible programs that allow people with only limited Hebrew or Greek knowledge to learn the nuances of those words so that they can compare them against the many English and other Bible translations to try to reach the best possible interpretation.

I field a never ending stream of requests from folks to advise them of the “best” Bible or one that is a direct word for word, literal translation. And I’m here to tell you that such a thing would sound so odd in English that it would be near to impossible to make sense of it. The grammatical structures of Hebrew, Greek and English are quite different from one another. Many words in Greek and Hebrew don’t have precise, one to one, English equivalents. But even more, as concerns the New Testament, behind those Greek words are the Hebrew thought patterns of their Hebrew authors who were attempting to express themselves about their Hebrew religion. But because (as in Paul’s case) the writers were usually sending their letters to Greek speakers in the Diaspora, they couldn’t use their Hebrew language to express themselves or the recipients wouldn’t be able to read it.

As one who has been privileged to travel extensively internationally, I can tell you that even if someone in another country is able to speak English well enough, many of the words and terms we use in our Western vocabulary mean something different to them. And that is because the terms and words we use have a direct relationship to our particular culture. Merely speaking a foreign language in no way assumes any understanding whatsoever of the societies in which that is their native language. Just because I might be able to speak Spanish doesn’t mean I have any understanding of Mexican culture or the cultures of Puerto Rico, Spain or Argentina. One of the best examples of this that I delight in retelling is that several years ago I purchased a riding toy for one of my grandchildren. It of course required assembly and was made (where else?) in China. So the English assembly instructions were written by English speaking Chinese. Everything was going along well until I read the following instruction: “Insert bolt through the wheel hub, and tighten the nut until it is happy”. Happy? How am I supposed to know when the nut is happy? In English the term happy is reserved as an expression of emotion. But apparently in Chinese culture it carries a little different meaning and can be extended to inanimate objects; it more means to make something (or perhaps someone) right or functioning in harmony.

So the reason for the existence of the scores of different Bible versions, in English alone, has to do with what choices a particular Bible translator or board of Bible editors made about how to define certain Greek and Hebrew words. Since almost all translators are beholden to one denomination or another, they will quite naturally use words that best uphold their theological beliefs (even if they might be atheists). The CJB is no different. So why do I use it? Because it reads so well when spoken out loud and because it inserts some words and names in Hebrew to constantly remind us that the Bible is a Hebrew document from Genesis to Revelation. Although a helpful tool, the CJB is not the greatest study Bible. The best solution for most students of God’s Word is to use a variety of Bibles, with the CJB as just one of them. On paper, one of the better technical translations is the KJV. But the problem with it is that it uses an antiquated dialect of English that was spoken 500 years ago and so many of the English

words used in the KJV had a very different meaning than it does for us who use modern English. There is one translation that I encourage people to avoid: the NIV. It is clearly an agenda driven Bible that will add or delete words and phrases and portions of verses to assure that its particular humanistic worldview is put forward.

So, with that, what is the better and more accurate translation of Romans 1:17 than the CJB? We find it in the English Standard Version (and it is spoken essentially this same way in many other familiar English versions):

^{ESV} Romans 1:17 *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."*

Remember how our CJB translated this verse: **¹⁷ *For in it is revealed how God makes people righteous in his sight;***

Did you hear the substantial difference between the two? The ESV speaks of the righteousness of God. The CJB speaks of the righteousness of people. I know where the CJB is trying to go with this approach but it is not true enough to the original language and so it muddles the picture on a matter of extreme importance to Believers.

There is probably no word that means fundamentally more to Judaism and to Christianity than righteous. And if we don't know how God intends for us to understand that term, then we have a major hole in the understanding of our faith and in our relationship with Him. So: what is the righteousness of God? What does that mean? What is God's righteousness? But even before we answer that, what does righteous mean in a generic sense? I'll tell you upfront that the answer to that question, not surprisingly, is found in the Torah. In fact the best explanation of the critical term righteous can be found in the Book of Exodus. I'll tell you a bit more about that momentarily. But first, in order to come to an informed and useful understanding of what righteous and righteousness mean in our Bibles, we need a very brief lesson in Greek and Hebrew.

With apologies to true language scholars (whom I admire beyond words), I'm going to explain this in easier terms that non-language scholars can understand. As we find it in the New Testament, the English word "righteous" (and its variations such as righteousness) is a translation of the Greek word **dikaioo**. **Dikaioo** has a few variations as well, such as **dikaios**, **dikaioyne**, and there is a couple more. But they all have the same basic root meaning. English translators say that in English the root meaning is righteous. However how did the Greek word **dikaioo** get chosen for this passage? In our case it seems that Paul chose it. My contention is that without fail Paul is always expressing Hebrew thought patterns in his writings so we need to understand what this word meant in Hebrew society. So in this particular case of verse 17, is there a way to prove my contention?

Fortunately, more than 250 years before Christ was born, the Hebrew Bible, the **Tanakh**, (what we call the Old Testament) was translated into Greek; that translation is called the Septuagint. We know from a very ancient document called the Letter of Aristeas that this translation project took place in Alexandria, Egypt, where there was an enormous Jewish population of almost 1

million. And the letter tells us that some of the Jerusalem Temple's finest scholarly priests were sent to Alexandria to both supply Hebrew Bible scrolls for the effort and to participate in the translation process so that it would remain as true as possible to the original intent (understanding that there will always be imperfections and some loss of precision in translations). Therefore, when we compare the word for word Greek of the Septuagint to the word for word Hebrew Bible, we should be able to see exactly which Greek word those ancient Hebrew scholars chose to translate any particular Hebrew word. And when we do that, and we find that same Greek word from the Septuagint used in a similar context in the New Testament (also written in Greek), we have ourselves a kind of Biblical Rosetta Stone; a voice from the past telling us what the ancients meant to convey from a Hebrew language and cultural viewpoint and how to carry it across to an entirely different language and culture. Or, in another sense, we have a means to find out from an Old Testament Hebrew perspective what the New Testament writer is attempting to convey to us.

What we find is that the Greek word **dikaioo** was the word chosen by the original writers/translators of the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew term **tzedek**. Therefore if we want to truly know what **dikaioo** (righteous) means in the New Testament, we need to study the Hebrew word **tzedek** in the Old Testament. That way we will understand what the Hebrew Paul had in mind in his native Hebrew thought pattern. I hope you are following me because it is critical for Believers to explore the proper and intended meaning of the term "righteous".

The first thing to understand is that righteousness (**tzedek**) as it applies to God (God's righteousness) is quite different from how it applies to humans (my righteousness or your righteousness). As it applies to humans it is fairly straightforward. Righteous (**tzedek**) can indicate a person who is "right" with God. That is, righteous is our desired status before the Lord. Or it can also mean DOING what is right; it describes a proper action or behavior. Thus the word righteous also has a direct connection to the concept of covenant. A covenant is a document (oral or written) in which two parties agree to do certain things, and to behave in certain agreed to ways. Therefore from a covenant perspective, DOING what is right in the Hebrew worldview means to DO what God says to do. And where does God tell us what to do and not to do? The Covenant of Moses (the Law). Righteous can also mean right in an ethical sense (right versus wrong, fair versus unfair, as we deal with our fellow man), and it can mean right in the sense of a person being in general conformity with God's known standards and rules.

In Hebrew culture there was an everyday term for a person who was considered to be very pious because they carefully followed the terms of God's Covenant with Israel: The Law of Moses. This person was called a **Tzadik** (a righteous one). Notice how **tzadik** and **tzedek** come from the same root. So all of this comes into play when ascertaining what Paul was envisioning when he used the term **dikaioo**: righteous.

Conversely, the term **unrighteous** is only ever used in the Bible to speak of a human and never of God. And usually it means to convey the idea of a person being unethical.

Righteousness as concerns God is more complex. A couple of well known places where **dikaioo** (righteous) is used in the Septuagint as it applies to God sheds some light on how we

are to understand what God's righteousness is. In Psalm 51:14 David says in a prayer, ***"Deliver me from those who seek my blood, O God, the God of my salvation; my tongue will rejoice in your righteousness"***. In Isaiah 46:13 we hear this: ***"I bring near my righteousness, and my salvation will not delay"***. So righteousness used in these two instances (and there are several other similar instances) makes salvation and righteousness parallel terms; that's a key understanding so let me say it again. As it concerns God, salvation and righteousness are parallel terms. So in one sense God's personal righteousness is His saving intervention for the sake of those who worship Him. And those who worship Him are (in Biblical terms) always His covenant people. So now we see this organic connection develop between salvation, righteousness, and covenant; at least we see it in Hebrew thought. However, as you are probably starting to see, it doesn't always translate over to Greek thought or English speaking cultures and so we lose an important understanding of some important faith principles.

Psalm 31 gives us a slightly different aspect of God's righteousness. In verse 1 we read: ***"in your righteousness deliver me and lead me out"***. So here God's righteousness seems to indicate God's faithfulness to the promises He has made to His people that He will be their deliverer from trouble and danger.

Another interesting aspect of God's righteousness is highlighted in Psalm 50. In verse 6 we see: ***"The heavens declare His righteousness, for God himself is judge"***. Following this verse the subject of Psalm 50 continues and it is that Israel has gone astray and she is being called to repent or face God's wrath. So we see here that God's righteousness is wrapped up in His justice of which He is the supreme judge. He will show mercy and deliver those who are faithful to His covenant with Israel, but He will punish and even reject those who aren't. God is the sole judge of this determination.

So then what does Paul mean by "God's righteousness" or the "righteousness of God" in verse 17? He means it in 3 senses: 1) as a divine attribute of God such that He will always do right and be just. Or 2), a description of God's activity of establishing right within humans and punishing those who are wrong. Or 3), speaking of God's process of moving those humans who are in a position of wrong before Him into a position of being right before Him (Christians would call this "being saved"). I see God's righteousness as embodying all three of these attributes.

The common point of intersection in all of these various aspects of righteousness is **salvation**. So the bottom line is this: in Paul's theology God's righteousness is His saving will towards His people. Anywhere and everywhere in Holy Scripture that we see the term God's righteousness or the righteousness of God, it means His saving will towards His people. In order that we not get bogged down here, I want you to know that there is more to it and it can be found in Exodus 21. We have not discussed the important aspect of God's justice in relation to God's righteousness, which is a pretty serious study all in itself. But if you want to understand this in a much more complete way, go online to study the Torah Class lesson for Exodus chapter 21. There justice and righteousness are discussed and how they relate to one another.

But let's take this a step further. When we look at verses 16 and 17, we see four key phrases or terms used: 1) The Gospel. 2) The power of God. 3) Salvation. And 4) God's righteousness. To Paul, and in Hebrew thought, these terms are roughly equivalent. The power of God refers to salvation. The power of God is an actual force even though it is invisible (like magnetism or gravity), not simply an ideal. Salvation happens by the power of God; that is, salvation happens by a divine force. God's righteousness expresses His will to save. And the essence of the Gospel is contained and manifested only in the power of God. We're not going to delve any deeper into the nuances of each of these terms for now. For the time being it is enough to understand as we go forward in our study of Romans that to Paul the terms Gospel, power of God, salvation, and God's righteousness are tightly interconnected. They are terms that are not quite, but almost, interchangeable.

The final words of verse 17 are: "the righteous will live by faith". This is a phrase taken from Habakkuk 2:4. Various English translations have slightly different ways of expressing what Paul said. The KJV has a more literal translation of this verse from Habakkuk and it reads:

^{KJV} **Habakkuk 2:4** *Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.*

Notice that in the CJB where we have the words "the righteous will live by faith"; but in the KJV of **Habakkuk** the words are: "the just shall live by his faith". Since Habakkuk is part of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) and written in Hebrew, then we see that the Hebrew word used is **Tzadik**, and this more literally means "righteous one". We discussed this term a few minutes ago, and it is a commonly used Hebrew term that refers to especially righteous and zealous Jews who are known to follow the Law of Moses scrupulously. So naturally, even though this verse is given to us in Greek in Roman 1:17, nonetheless since it is a direct quote from the Old Testament we know exactly what Paul meant. He was picturing a **Tzadik**; a person who diligently followed the Law of Moses. Thus we should properly have it read: "And the righteous one shall live by his faith".

Notice something else: Habakkuk was a Prophet and a contemporary of Jeremiah. He lived and prophesied before the Babylonian Exile of 600 B.C. So Paul's thought that the righteous ones (the **Tzadikim**) live by faith (implying faith in the God of Israel) is in no way a New Testament invention. Even more, Habakkuk was essentially quoting Genesis:

^{CJB} **Genesis 15:6** *He (Avram) believed in ADONAI, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

So the same exact strand of Hebrew thought that began with Abraham, picked up and re-phrased by Habakkuk, is now directly brought forward to Paul's day in the Book of Romans as Paul explains the Believers relationship with God and especially as it concerns Christ. And we need to understand it in Romans in its original Old Testament Hebrew terms and not try to redefine it for a Greek or gentile Christian viewpoint.

Let's move on. Paul now begins to flesh out this question: if the Gospel of Yeshua is the Power of God for salvation for those who believe and have faith, then what of those who do

NOT accept the Gospel? The short answer? They receive God's wrath. God's wrath is not far from a taboo subject in many congregations. The rationale is that Jesus can't be both love and wrath at the same time. Therefore since "God is love", and since we are supposedly all New Testament Believers with Jesus as our new God, then divine wrath must be a thing of the past. The Old Testament God was full of wrath; but the New Testament God is only love. Paul makes a liar of that absurd position in verse 18.

Let me say this as well; Paul is expressing that the same Gospel and the same Power of God that saves ALSO produces God's wrath from heaven for the unrighteous. Why is that? Because the Gospel is just. How can anything be considered just if a) there is no distinction between, and definition of, wrong behavior versus right behavior and b) if there is no consequence for wrong behavior or blessing for right behavior? Where does the definition of right and wrong come from? Where is it written so that we can know what it is? In the Torah; the Law of Moses specifically.

CJB 1 John 3:4 *Everyone who keeps sinning is violating Torah- indeed, sin is violation of Torah.*

Or, as the KJV puts it:

KJV 1 John 3:4 *Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.*

Notice that the Apostle John's New Testament definition of sin (violating the Law of Moses) is precisely the same as the Old Testament definition of sin. Christ pays the price for our wrong behavior; He has no need to pay anything for our right behavior. So once again the tight connection between the Gospel and the Covenant of Moses is made by both Paul and John.

READ ROMANS 1:18 - 20

Notice in Romans 1:18 that "suppressing the truth" is one of those wrong behaviors that the ungodly and the unrighteous do. What is the truth? God's Word is the truth. God's covenants, and God's Gospel are truth. As much as I'm for Israel and the Jewish people, the sad reality is that mainstream Judaism is exactly who this verse is pointing a finger towards: those who suppress the truth. It is virtually a crime with possible jail time involved for telling the truth of the Gospel in Israel. If you are a Believing Jew who wants to immigrate to Israel, every effort will be made by the Israeli government to prevent you from coming UNLESS you will renounce the Gospel in front of a Rabbi who will certify it.

So that we don't lose the forest because of the trees remember that Paul is writing this letter to Roman Believers in the city of Rome. Many are gentiles, but many more are Jews. And he is telling them that the Jews of Rome who refuse to believe and who make being a Jewish Believer difficult are making themselves the targets of God's wrath. Why is this important? Because Judaism taught that simply having a Jewish heritage was enough to be in good stead with God.

Paul also says that if you don't know who God is, it's because you don't want to. God has shown you who He is in the awesomeness of His creation; and in some ways that itself ought to suffice. So don't blame God if you receive His wrath; blame yourself. Understand; there is no evidence of atheism in these times. As a matter of fact it seems that, historically, atheism is a new phenomenon that began in Europe in the 1700s as a result of the Enlightenment philosophers. So when we read in verse 19 that God has made Himself known to everyone, it doesn't mean that people in the Bible days were making a decision as to whether there was such a thing as a god. The issue for them was: who is God?

Let me make something plain: anyone who argues against Creation as a product of the God of the Bible; a universe and everything that exists, seen and unseen that is a Creation that is little more than an expression of God's will; then that person has taken hold of a deception that will leave them deceived about almost every thing else that involves God. When I hear of a Christian who says that they do not accept the Creation story; that Creation was not of God but rather was something from the natural realm, I have serious concerns about their claim of salvation. If God says that the prime evidence of Him is His Creation, and you don't believe in a divine Creation, then you are rejecting the prime evidence of God. How that can possibly co-exist with salvation I can't fathom. If to you Creation is not the truth, why would you believe the Gospel? I say you can't; rather you have deceived yourself to believe that you are saved.

Even more, Paul says that in reality God's existence IS evident to everyone including the unrighteous. So what a denier is doing is actively working at not believing in God because the evidence is so clear and powerful that it takes real effort NOT to believe. As a young person, I scoffed at this statement of Paul; but the older I get the more I see the absolute truth of it.

Paul continues his argument against any excuse for non-Believers in verse 20 and continues to base it on the reality of Creation itself. Let me paraphrase: Paul says that although the power of God is invisible, the result of what that power wrought (the Universe) can be easily seen. No reasonable person can believe that the Universe just "happened" without there being something or someone who made it happen. Thus what we can see as we step outside and look all around us, is all the proof that anyone needs to know that God exists and what many of His qualities are. Listen to the beginning of a beautiful Psalm of David.

Psalm 19:1-7 CJB

^{CJB} Psalm 19:1 For the leader. A psalm of David:

² The heavens declare the glory of God, the dome of the sky speaks the work of his hands.

³ Every day it utters speech, every night it reveals knowledge.

⁴ Without speech, without a word, without their voices being heard,

⁵ their line goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world. In them he places a tent for the sun,

⁶ ***which comes out like a bridegroom from the bridal chamber, with delight like an athlete to run his race.***

⁷ ***It rises at one side of the sky, circles around to the other side, and nothing escapes its heat.***

The Creation is God's truth every bit as much as God's Word is God's truth. To deny one is to deny the other. But equally important to grasp is that the Biblical truth is not merely something to which our intellects agree. Rather it is something that we are to have faith in and we are to obey. From God's perspective sin is a denial, a rejection, or a rebellion against the divine truth.

There's so much more that needs to be said as we continue with Romans chapter 1 next time.