

What Counts Most

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Preacher: Brian King

[0:00] Okay, let's pray. Father, I pray that there will be no more technical issues for the rest of the service,! so that your word might go out.

And we pray that your word today will indeed be a life-giving word for all of us, reminding us of what is most important, so that we might know how we are to live our lives for you.

We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen. Now, what is it that gets you up in the morning? What drives you more than anything else? What is that one thing that shapes how you think, how you talk, and even how you organize your day?

For some, it's our children. We gladly lose our sleep and rearrange our lives around them. For others, it might be a hobby or a passion that quietly takes center stage in our schedules.

But whatever it is, we all have something that gives shape to our present existence. Now, what about the Apostle Paul?

[1:07] What drives him? Well, listen to how he introduces himself to the Roman Christians. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.

Then consider what he goes on to say in Romans 1, verse 14 to 16. I am adapter both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.

That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles.

And then if we jump to near the end of the letter, in Romans 15, verse 15 to 16, we find him saying this. Yet I have written to you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.

He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God. And then just a few verses down in verse 20, it has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.

[2:31] So by now I'm sure you can see the pattern. For Paul, it is all about the gospel. In the ancient world, if you wanted to highlight what mattered most, you talk about it at the beginning and at the end.

And this is how we know this is what drives Paul. Because at the start and the end of this letter, the gospel is Paul's big theme.

And make no mistake, this isn't some temporary obsession. Paul isn't like some lovesick teenager engaging in a romance that will run out of steam in two months.

No. Because when Paul sat down to write Romans, he had already been preaching the gospel for 25 years.

So that means he's been following Jesus for close to 30 years. And yet, he's no less excited than he was on day one.

[3 : 35] If anything, his excitement has only grown. And that is evident later on in Romans 15. There, after telling us about his travels all over the Mediterranean, just so people could hear the gospel, he then tells us he wants to head to Spain.

Not so that he can retire by the beach, but so that he can plant the gospel in new soil. And that's how much the gospel drives Paul.

So no wonder his Instagram bio says this, verse 1 again. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus. That's his LinkedIn tagline. His public profile. And you have to understand how weird that must have sounded. You see, that word servant is literally the word slave.

And back then, a substantial proportion of Rome's population were slaves. They were treated more like property than like people, bought and sold as their master's wish.

[4 : 48] And if you were a slave, your goal in life would almost certainly be to stop being one. Yet, here is Paul, a well-educated Roman citizen with highly regarded credentials, willingly calling himself a slave of Christ Jesus.

Can you imagine proudly proclaiming this on your Facebook page in a freedom-obsessed city? Yet, for Paul, describing himself as such doesn't strip him of dignity, but highlights his true identity.

He belongs to Jesus. And Jesus owns his life. But this raises a question for us. You see, my brothers and sisters, if you call this church your home today, that means you are part of Kuching Evangelical Church.

And where does that word evangelical come from? It comes from the Greek word euangelion, which simply means gospel.

The same word Paul has been using throughout. So here is the question. If the gospel we believe in is the same as Paul's gospel, shouldn't it drive our lives to?

[6 : 17] If the gospel has so thoroughly redefined who he is, doesn't that mean it should be thoroughly shaping who we are as well?

Indeed, that's what the very first core conviction of our church, which you can find in our bulletin, to be centered on the gospel, is getting at. It is basically an aspiration to be like Paul.

But we know theory and practice don't always match. We know that we can become distracted, we can turn inward, we can let petty issues become inflated, and Paul knows that too.

That's why he wrote Romans. You see, that's exactly what was happening to the Roman Christians. They had received the gospel, but what they really needed was to be reshaped by it, grounded in it, and united around it.

And so Paul wants to persuade them that the gospel itself is what counts most. Paul wants it to so grip their hearts and their minds that it would transform their life's orientation.

[7 : 38] And that is why we are starting 2026 here. You see, as we enter the new year, I also want to persuade your hearts and my own heart as well that the gospel is what counts most.

I want us not just to receive the gospel, but to be so reshaped by it that we would become a genuinely gospel-centered church, not just on paper, but in practice.

And that's why we are opening Romans 1 verse 1 to 7 today. Today, Paul will expose us to three different aspects of this glorious gospel. And as we take them in, my prayer is that the Lord will begin working in our hearts such that we will want to give our whole lives over to be slaves of Jesus Christ.

So let us dive in. And the first thing I want us to understand today is that this is first and foremost God's gospel, not ours.

This is first and foremost God's gospel, not ours. Let's start by thinking about that word gospel. We usually hear it in religious context, so we tend to think of it as a religious word.

[9 : 00] But actually, that Greek word euangelion didn't initially belong to the world of religion. It belonged to the world of media.

It simply meant good news. And good news is when you say, I got the job. We won the game. She gave birth safely. But that word doesn't just refer to any good news.

More precisely, it refers to good news that is momentous, that's life-changing, that's world-shifting. So, the discovery of a life-saving vaccine during a global pandemic, that's a kind of gospel.

The collapse of an evil totalitarian regime, that's also a kind of gospel. The rescue of trapped miners after weeks underground, that too is gospel.

These are the kinds of events that reshape life itself. And in the ancient world, this is what people meant by gospel. News that changes everything.

[10 : 19] But what makes post-gospel different from all the other gospels? Verse 1 tells us it's the gospel of God. God. In other words, this good news doesn't just come from humans, it comes from God himself.

It is of divine origin. And that changes the calculation entirely. Think about it this way. If I said to you, good news, the Orlando magic won, or good news, my nephew got straight ace.

You might be glad for me, but it wouldn't really be good news for you, would it? It doesn't concern your life in any real way, especially if you are not a basketball fan or you have never met my nephew.

It is someone else's news. But God's news is different. For God is not just one voice among many.

He is the creator and Lord of all. So if this good news is from God, it is news that concerns everyone.

[11 : 36] Because it concerns what God has done in the world we all live in. So it's not just good news that belongs to the West or to the East.

It's not just good news that belongs to people in church. It is globally significant because it is God's good news. And that brings me to another implication.

You see, if a gospel came from ourselves, then it could never be truly secure, final, or decisive.

Again, think about it. if an evil dictator is overthrown by a courageous resistance movement, that's good news, isn't it?

But what is to stop another tyrant from rising up decades later? Or, if one society experiences a moral reawakening, how can we be sure the next generation won't slide back into corruption?

[12 : 48] human victories, however real, are always fragile. And that's because any gospel, any good news that originates from us, can only ever be temporary.

It depends on human strength, human resolve, and human goodness, all of which can fail sooner or later.

At best, such gospels can only improve things for a while, but they can never finally set the world right. But the gospel Paul speaks of is different.

Because it comes from God, it announces something decisive, something that does not depend on our consistency or our moral strength.

Because it is rooted in the character and actions of God, this good news cannot be undone, nor does it need to be repeated again and again.

[13:57] It is secure, final, and decisive. And to say that this is the gospel of God, it's not just to say he's the source, but he's also its center.

In other words, the gospel is all about him, not us. That's what makes it good news. But how, you might ask.

Well, contrast this with the kind of gospel the world promotes today. What do they offer? There are many variations, but at its heart, the gospel the world offers is fundamentally a gospel of self.

Listen to some of these popular sayings, for example, should appear on the screen. Find your inner truth, then live that truth. Don't let society put you in a box.

Be whoever you want to be. You do you, you are enough. And this version of the gospel at first, you know, it sounds so appealing, because it sounds like the perfect life.

[15:12] It promises freedom without constraint, be whoever you want, define your own purpose, and live life on your terms.

That sounds like good news. But here's the problem. If we make ourselves the final authority, that eventually becomes a burden too heavy to bear.

Because if you are the only source of your meaning, if your worth and identity and purpose is entirely up to you, then life becomes a treadmill that never stops.

Because you must constantly prove that you are worthy of your own ambitions every single day. You must figure out which of your ever-changing desires represent the real you.

And you find yourself having to work tirelessly to improve yourself without any respite. And all that eventually becomes a recipe for anxiety and burnout.

[16:27] So the gospel of self doesn't actually free you from pressure. It simply moves the pressure that maybe came from your parents or from society to inside your own head.

By contrast, the gospel of God is freeing. Why? Because it tells us the world does not actually revolve around us.

It tells us we exist for God rather than he for us. And if so, then we don't have to strive to create meaning or find some sort of significance in our lives.

We don't need to continually justify our existence because that work has already been done for us. Our task is simply to receive what God has given us, to live out the purpose that he has already chosen for us.

And that brings relief, rest, and security that no human striving ever could. Well, this is exactly what Paul is talking about in Romans 1 verse 1 when he describes this good news as the gospel of God.

[17:58] And are you beginning to see why this gospel should redefine us and guide us? Are you beginning to see why this gospel is what counts most?

Because it is first and foremost God's gospel, not ours. It is from him, it's all about him, and it tells us our purpose is to be set apart for him.

And since his kingdom is the most secure and life-giving kingdom there is, living for him is actually the best way to live. But Paul is just getting started.

He's got more exciting things to tell us about the gospel. And so secondly, he tells us this gospel we have is a promise kept. A promise kept.

Did you notice that in verse 2? This is the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures. In other words, Paul is saying to us, want to know why I am so committed to this gospel?

[19 : 15] Because it was always God's plan A. This was his idea from the very beginning. You see, sometimes we can think of the Bible like this.

Oh, God had a great plan in the garden, we messed it up, and God spent the next few thousand years fumbling around, trying to find a fix, until he finally came up with Jesus.

It's almost like the gospel was just a divine backup plan. But Romans 1 verse 2 says, that is just not true.

For from the very first pages of Genesis, God has already spoken of the gospel. Indeed, you could describe the Old Testament as one long trail of God's promises.

Over and over again, it keeps pointing forward to a day when God would establish his kingdom, deal with our sin, save his people, and get rid of all injustice and evil once and for all.

[20 : 27] And here in Romans 1 verse 2, God now says, guess what? All those great Old Testament promises, that day you have been longing for?

It's arrive in Christ. And we don't have time today to unpack what all those promises are or how exactly Christ fulfills them, but if you want the full picture, then come and join the Bible overview class I teach every year.

Today, though, I just want to highlight why this matters for you. Because if the gospel is a promise cap, it's not just a fact of history, it is a window into God's heart.

It is evidence of three things. Number one, it is evidence that God is intentional. You see, for some of you today, you might feel like life is quite random.

Maybe the world feels like it's spinning out of control. But if Romans 1 verse 2 is true, that means the God of the gospel is not just winging it.

[21 : 45] After all, he didn't just stumble into the Christmas story by accident. Instead, he had it all mapped out over centuries.

And that means you can be sure he isn't stumbling into your 2026 unsure of what will happen next. He knows exactly what he's doing.

As one theologian beautifully puts it, these promises he made were simply his love written down in advance so we could trust him with our future.

Then number two, it's evidence that God is reliable. For if the gospel is a promise cap, that means we're in the hands of a God who stays true to his word.

And that is good news. You see, people break promises all the time, don't they? Sometimes they do it within hours.

[22 : 52] But when God speaks, it is as good as done. He binds himself to his word. So think about it. If he kept a centuries-old promise to send a saviour, which is probably the hardest promise to keep, then you can be absolutely certain he will keep the promises that get you through tomorrow.

To never leave you, to never forsake you, and to eventually wipe every tear from your eyes. And then number three, it's evidence that God is patient.

Today we live in a world of instant results. We want answers now, change now, relief now. But Romans 1 verse 2 shows us that God is a God who works across centuries.

centuries. He is not in a hurry. He waited thousands of years to send the saviour at exactly the right time.

And that means something for us. If God was patient enough to bring the saviour at just the right moment in history, you can trust his timing in the middle of your story too.

[24 : 19] He works through time, not around it. So our gospel is God's gospel, and it's a promise he has faithfully kept across the ages.

That's another powerful reason we can devote ourselves wholeheartedly to this gospel. But there is still one really important question we haven't answered yet.

What, or rather, who is this promise actually about? Well, that brings us to our third point. Thirdly, this gospel is about Jesus, God's enthroned son.

Do you see that at the beginning of verse 3? This gospel is regarding God's son. But what specifically does Paul want us to know about Jesus?

There are really two things, aren't there? Look again at verse 3. First off, Paul wants us to know he was a descendant of David.

[25 : 30] And at first glance, we might reply, oh, so what? But turn with me now to the Old Testament, to 2 Samuel 7. Now let me just give you a bit of background. David is Israel's great king, king, and in this passage, God is making a promise to him.

Through the prophet Nathan, the Lord is telling him that one of his descendants will one day rule forever over God's kingdom.

As he puts it in 2 Samuel 7 verse 12 on the screen, when your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, this is God speaking, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom.

He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son.

Now, what an astounding promise that is, isn't it? And Paul's point is very simple. Jesus is that very son of David. That's why the gospel is good news, because Jesus is that king of God's eternal kingdom.

[26 : 49] And how can we be sure? Because verse 4 again, it's the second thing Paul tells us, he has been appointed the son of God by his very resurrection.

Now, that word appointed might sound weird to our ears, because it makes it sound like Jesus was simply promoted to be the son of God. But if we understand verses 3 to 4 simply to be tracing the entire story of Jesus' life while he was here on earth, then it makes more sense.

In verse 3, Paul is simply saying that if Jesus, the eternal son of God, were to come as a descendant of David, he has to come as a human being.

And though of royal lineage, he came in weakness and humility, born to die on the cross. But from his lowly position, verse 4, God now exalted him.

Through the resurrection, Jesus was enthroned, king of Israel, but as king over the entire universe. That's what the language of appointment is getting at.

[28 : 12] It's really the language of enthronement. It's a bit like a royal family, where a child is already born king, but also becomes king at his coronation.

That's what is happening here. King Jesus is being coronated. at the resurrection. But why does this matter for us today?

Think about it again. I know many of us in this hall today have called ourselves Christians for a long time. And when you hear the word gospel, what do you most associate it with?

Salvation? Justification? Forgiveness? If you did, you are absolutely right to do so. I mean, the book of Romans will do the same.

But do you associate it also with enthronement? Do you associate it also with kingship?

[29:17] you should. Because Paul does. You see, I want you to scan through the whole of verses 1 to 7 again with me.

And tell me, what repeated word or phrase do you see? It's almost too obvious. The answer is Jesus.

And you might think, well, duh, of course. But look closely again. Here's the thing. Paul doesn't just say Jesus.

Instead, he keeps saying Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus. And that is significant. You see, too often, we reduce Christ to simply an alternative way of referring to Jesus, don't we?

Maybe a few of us here might even have thought that is his surname. But Jesus and Christ are not equivalent terms. Christ is a title.

[30:24] It means Messiah, which means the anointed king. Now, try to read this passage again, but this time replace the word Christ with the word king.

Verse 1. Paul, a slave of king Jesus. Verse 4. By his resurrection, Jesus is appointed the king, our lord. Verse 6.

You also are called to belong to Jesus, the king. Verse 7. Grace and peace to you from the Lord Jesus, the king. You see, what is the gospel about?

Is it about how while we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly? Absolutely. But this is the thing we must not miss.

The person who died for us, the person who bestows on us grace, is the king of the whole universe. Again, to quote another scholar, kingship is the vessel through which forgiveness flows.

[31:34] the forgiving power of Jesus cannot be separated from his royal authority as the head of a new creation.

In other words, why is the gospel what should count most in our lives? Because if we have received the gospel, we are not just receiving Jesus as savior, but as king.

And our relationship with him is not the same as with the young dipertuan agong. Yes, as Malaysian citizens, we honor our agong. As Christians, we pray for him.

But in many ways, he doesn't have much say in our lives. If you are trying to figure out what course you should do at university or what job you should apply for, you probably won't be consulting him.

But Jesus is a different king. Again, look at the end of verse 5. What does it mean to say Jesus is your king?

[32:47] It means you and I belong to him. Our bodies belong to him. Our possessions belong to him. Our time belongs to him.

Our energy belongs to him. And if he owns the rights, we don't get the final say. You see, what does it mean to call yourself a Christian?

It is simple, really. It is to reorder your life around Christ, your king. Otherwise, our Christianity is just a meaningless label.

we wear. But of course, we do so joyfully because Jesus is a different king, not just in the scope of his authority, but in his amazing generosity.

He is the good and gracious king. For what has this good and gracious king done? The rest of the book of Romans tells us. He willingly became a sacrifice of atonement for you.

[34:00] He has been your greatest advocate in the divine courtroom. He poured out the fullness of God's spirit into you. His gospel, verse 7, is that we can be those who are loved by God and receive true grace peace and true peace because this very king gave his life for us.

That's why we can be more than happy to give our lives to him. Because isn't that what our lives are all about?

Now, remember what I said at the beginning about how the start and the end of the letter tells us what is most important? Well, let's do it again.

Look at 1, verse 5. What is Paul's mission? It is to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.

Then turn with me to Romans 16, verse 25 to 26. How does Paul end his letter? It should appear on the screen. 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.

[35 : 33] So, do you see? That's Paul's ambition. He wants everyone, everywhere, to belong to Jesus, to submit to him as the king, not because Jesus is some power hungry egomaniac, but because Jesus is ultimately the best king, who wants to give us an unspoiled, renewed creation.

And that is the full gospel. The full gospel is not, Jesus is your savior, full stop. It is not, Jesus is here to get you out of bad situations, full stop.

It is not, Jesus is here to feel the emptiness in your life, full stop. It is not that those things are not true, they are true.

But if we stop there, we run the risk of turning the gospel into something that's all about me, not God. But Romans 1 is clear.

The gospel is all about Jesus, God's enthroned son, whom we have put our faith in. And because we now trust him, that means we think he is absolutely trustworthy, we therefore want to obey him.

[37 : 01] Even when it's hard, even when it calls for sacrifice, even when it calls for surrender. So as we finish, I want you to have this picture in your minds.

Now, picture that you are packing a bag to go on holiday. Many of you have done that recently, I know. And you've got one of those soft travel bags, you know, with the zip down the middle, and you begin throwing everything in, clothes, toiletries, shoes, until it is close to full.

And then you realise, hey, hey, still got one more thing I want to put in. But, you know, it's pretty full, right? So what do you do? You kind of shove everything down, and then you take that thing, you try to fit that thing in, and you pull on the zip.

And, you know, if it can't quite fit in, you then sit on the back, you kneel on it, you're trying to squeeze it in. That's often how we treat Jesus.

We say, yes, of course I want Jesus in my life. But our back is already full. Family, studies, work, money, plans, dreams.

[38 : 22] And then we try to squeeze Jesus in somewhere at the end. But that is actually the wrong way round.

Because if you really want things to fit properly, what do you do? You take everything out, and you put the most important thing in first.

Then everything else has to find its place around it. that's how it's meant to be with Jesus. He's not meant to be squeezed into our lives.

He's meant to be the one at the center. He's meant to be the one who counts the most. And actually, when you do that, you will realize something amazing.

Your family, your work, your studies, your dreams, they actually make more sense when they revolve around him rather than ourselves. That's what it means for Jesus to be God's gospel.

[39 : 30] Or, as the end of verse 5 puts it, we are now meant to live for his name's sake. So, let me ask you, as you look at your calendar and your goals for the year, how will you be living your 2026?

What will be driving it? Who will be at the center? Is it the very gospel and glory of Jesus? Well, today, as we stand at the threshold of this new year, let's stop trying to squeeze the king into the corners of our lives.

Instead, let's lay everything at his feet and say, Jesus, you are the priority, you are the one who counts. Let's live this year, not for our own ambitions, but for the sake of his life-giving name.

Let's pray. Father, I thank you that your word is living and active.

I pray even now, your voice is being heard through Romans chapter one. We thank you so much for Jesus, the one who is our sacrifice of atonement, but who has also been enthroned by his resurrection from the dead as our Lord and King.

[41 : 11] And so, Father, as those who have come to you by faith, we pray that we will also exercise the obedience that comes from faith for your name's sake.

Help us, Lord, to consider our plans, our goals, our calendar for this year, and help us to make sure that it revolves around you and not ourselves. All this we pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen.