Good morning, Life Fellowship. Hey, there is something that I know that all of you want in this world and that is good news, right? I mean we live in a world that is replete with bad news. Many people don’t even want to watch the evening news because it depresses them, or they don’t want to read their newspaper because it depresses them. And perhaps even in your own life you have heard enough bad news to last for the rest of your life. Maybe you heard bad news this past week. Perhaps there was a job layoff or a friend that you cared about deeply that just found out that they have an incurable disease. Or maybe you found out that you didn’t get into the college that you wanted.

Life has a ton of bad news. And in a world that has bad news, in a bad news world, all of us long for some good news. I don’t know anyone that wakes up in the morning and thinks, ‘You know it would be just fantastic if I could just run into a bunch of bad news all day long. I would just love to have a horrific day.’ How many of you woke up this morning and thought that? How many of you wished for everything to go wrong when you woke up this morning?

Of course none of you did that. We don’t think that way. We want good news. In fact the next time you are feeling a little bit down about the day, I found a network this past week that I thought was helpful. It is called the ‘Good News Network.’ And at goodnewsnetwork.org they have reached a milestone where they have now posted over 18,000 good news stories. So if we are looking for some good news this is a site fully and exclusively dedicated to featuring and showcasing good news.

For example, here is one such statement. “Norway wants to give Finland a mountain for its birthday.” Pretty sweet I guess if you are Finland. “A little boy empties his piggy bank for mom who has just been robbed.” Well, that is nice I guess because in the midst of the bad news of being robbed, her son provides good news. “A firefighter saves a cat with mouth to mouth.” I would have let the cat die, but nevertheless that was good news for both the cat and its owner.

In our world we can’t live in denial of either good news or bad news. If we are being honest, ours is a world that has good news and bad news. In fact we know this statement which I have always hated: “Do you want the good news first or the bad news?” Well, I don’t want the bad news at all, just give me the good news. But we can’t have our cake and eat it too.

Now when it comes to the book of Romans, this book that we are going to study now for the next several month, this is a letter that is loaded with good news. In fact as Pastor Jason mentioned, the word ‘gospel’ means ‘good news.’ Now the word ‘gospel’ was a common term utilized in the Greco/Roman world. The difference in the Scriptures is that Jesus and the apostles took that word and they infused it with theologically rich meaning. It is a word that is lavished with highlighted theological significance. So the
gospel has good news for us. It is theologically centered good news. And we will learn about that as we unpack this book.

The book of Romans does not get to the good news, so to speak, and really unpack the flair of it without helping us understand the bad news. That is to say that we cannot fully appreciate the good news apart from the bad news as it relates to the state of our soul. We are not going to appreciate grace unless we understand the problem of guilt.

What we are going to do with this series is to teach the book of Romans over five different sections. We are going to take the five sections of the book of Romans and we are going to turn it into five different series.

On a big large scale, 30,000 square foot level, what we have with the book of Romans is God’s gospel, the large overarching theme. But then you come to Chapters 1 to 3 and we start the book off in section one and we see that we have a problem. It is the problem of guilt. And the reason that we have the problem of guilt is because all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And sin means that we have missed the standard, that all of us have fallen short of God’s righteous standard.

But the good news is this - though there is bad news there is also good news. There is good news because the problem of guilt is met with the solution of grace. And we will see this come together in this book. Now Romans is Apostle Paul’s longest letter of the letters that he wrote. It has 7,114 words in this letter. And it is a fascinating study. If you are a guest and you are exploring what it looks like to be a Christian, and you are thinking about Christianity, Romans is a great place to start.

The gospel of John might feel a little bit lighter, but Romans is a good book to start with because it helps people to really consider where they stand with God. Are we right with God? How can we be made right with God? What is wrong with our soul? What is wrong with our mind? Why is it that I try to do certain things and when I set out to do them I do the very thing I don’t want to do? What is going on in my life at times? Why do I feel schizophrenia? Why do I feel like two people at times wanting to do one thing and then doing another thing?

See the gospel is not just for non-Christians to enter their way into Christianity. The gospel is for everyone, as well as Christians. We are to live by the gospel. As Christians we are to feed on it constantly, because the gospel is not an ‘it.’ It is a ‘Him.’ The gospel is the good news about Jesus. The gospel is relational, and it is about being relationally connected to God. It is about coming out of the bad news of being separated from Him, and entering into the good news of being united with Him.

Martin Luther, who was deeply touched by this particular book, and we will talk more about that as today’s chapter unfolds, said this: “This letter (speaking of Romans) is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is the purest gospel. It is well
worth a Christian’s while not only to memorize it word for word, but also to occupy himself with it daily as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.”

I now invite you to turn to the book of Romans and we are going to look in Chapter 1. As you are turning there I want to let you know that it was written by Paul in AD 57 while he was in Corinth. He wrote this letter for the purpose of helping them understand the gospel. There was obviously some confusion taking place between the Jews and the Gentiles. All those who are Gentiles would be most of us, and he was writing it for them to get the gospel right. And he helps them to understand very beautifully what the gospel is, and what it can mean to our lives.

Before we really start to unpack it I want to say that this book has a lot of meaning in my own life. I remember being in Bible College having to study Greek and then when I went off to Dallas Seminary we had to study two years of Hebrew, which is what the Old Testament was written in. And then we had 2 ½ years of Greek studying the New Testament. One of the exciting crowns of all of our studies was that after two complete years of studying Greek, and in our fifth semester we were able to study the book of Romans.

In fact we had to take it. You had to come to class without your English book, but you brought your Greek New Testament and we would translate the entire book of Romans from the Greek to English literally parsing every word. We had to know what tense every single word in the book of Romans was operating in. We had to know how it was functioning. We had to know how the sentences were coming apart. We were tested on it. And we would sit in class and we would read the book of Romans in Greek.

It was such a treat because I had a professor who got his PhD in New Testament Greek at the University of Oxford in England. And sitting under this scholar and studying the book of Romans was quite a treat. In fact it was in that class that one of our elders, who up to this time I had only known him on a first name basis, was Matt Hatfield. And he leaned over one day to me and said, ‘Hey when are you graduating?’ And I told him and then I said that I was actually flying out to Charlotte tomorrow because I am thinking about planting a church out there. And he said, ‘That is crazy. I was out jogging in my neighborhood last week and when I got back I told my wife, ‘Wouldn’t it be cool if we could find someone to go to the Lake Norman area with us to plant a church.’

And I thought he must be kidding me. I am going out to this area tomorrow to see if I am supposed to plant a church there, and he is sitting next to me knowing nothing about where I am going, and this happens. It turns out that he went to Davidson College
and through that powerful experience, God called Matt and Jenny and their kids to move to this area to help us start Life Fellowship. What happened? The power of God showed up while we were studying the book of Romans in a classroom in Dallas. And Romans is a book about spreading the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. God took Matt and me and fused our hearts together and told us to go spread the gospel in Lake Norman. That was the book of Romans at work.

So as we delve in, I would want to say that we are going to look through the first several verses very quickly, because our focus is going to be on verses 16 and 17 which are the theme of the entire book of Romans. What we will do now is start off in verse 1 where we see Paul identifies himself as the author, and he says: “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus.” The word servant in the Greek is doulos and it means ‘a slave,’ but don’t get bad images in your mind of a slave. This is one who willingly submits to his master, and Paul is saying that he has a master and it is Jesus Christ. “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle.” The Greek word for apostle is apostolos, and it means one who is sent to share the gospel, the good news.

“Set apart for the gospel of God.” There it is - the gospel of God. And we learn what the gospel of God is as it crystalizes for us as we go through these different chapters. Verse 2, “Which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures.” So the gospel was promised, and the prophets in the Old Testament were talking about this Messiah that was to come. The Messiah did come, but the Jewish people weren’t looking for the kind of Messiah. He came in humility and they were looking for someone to come as royalty.

Verse 3, “Concerning His Son, who was descended from David, according to the flesh.” This speaks of the humanity of Jesus that He took on. “And was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Even in these first four verses we can see the three persons of the Trinity, as Christ is talked about, God refers to the Father, and we also see the Spirit of holiness. Verse 5, “Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His name among all the nations.” So that is what they are trying to do, they are strengthening the churches, they are helping people to live out their faith for the sake of His name, so that the nations can see and desire Him.

Verse 6, “Including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.” So Paul identifies himself as the author, he talks a little bit about his calling to be an apostle, he talks about what his message is. It is about Jesus, it is about spreading it. And now in verse 7 he reveals who the audience is. It is Rome. He says, “To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints; Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” He offers up a little blessing.
And then in verse 8 he says, “First I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.” And as I studied and thought about it this week, I thought how cool would that be, if people in the Lake Norman area could thank God for Life Fellowship being in the area, because of the faith and how we live and the examples that are set in this church, and more so spreading further and beyond.

See news of these people had reached Paul. He tells them that their faith is proclaimed in all the world. Verse 9, “For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God’s will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.” Paul had never been to Rome, he hadn’t started the church there at Rome, but he longed to go there.

Maybe that is you and you have a certain longing in your life, you have a certain nation you want to go to, you have a certain continent you want to share the gospel on. Maybe you feel this tug, you feel this burden. That was Paul, he wants to take the gospel and he wants to share it more with them in Rome. In verse 12 he says that he wants to be encouraged by them: “That is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.”

Verse 13, “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented). And then in verse 14 he says, “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.” What is his obligation? It is to share the gospel, that is to say the good news is for everyone. The gospel is for everyone.

And then I love what he says in verse 15, “So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.” He is writing to many of the people who are already believers, but he is eager to preach the gospel to them. What is that all about? Isn’t the gospel just for nonbelievers? No? We are to preach the gospel to each other. We are to always remind each other of the good news. We need the gospel every day in our lives, and I will explain more of what that entails a little later.

So with that in mind, we need to ask ourselves if we are eager to share the gospel, because Paul was eager to share the gospel. We come now to the theme of Romans in verses 16 and 17 and it is this: “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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, The righteous shall live by faith.”

It is as if Paul is saying he is very proud of the gospel, and that is a big statement coming from Paul when we consider his story. Think about who he is. He hated the
Christians before he experienced life change. We know in Acts Chapter 7 that Paul was there watching the first martyr of the church, Stephen, being stoned to death. Paul was giving approval for Stephen to be stoned to death.

Then Paul, with a letter in his hand, was on the Damascus Road going to have Christians persecuted. And on that Road, Saul became Paul, because he was radically saved. And Paul experienced the power of salvation in his life, whereas he used to be ashamed of Christianity. He previously wanted to eradicate Christianity from off the face of the earth. So he at one time Paul had found the gospel completely shameful and now he says he is not ashamed of the gospel, of the good news of Jesus Christ.

What about you this morning? Do you find that you can feel and identify with those feelings of shame? You don’t really want to pray? You don’t want anyone to see you praying? Maybe you have a Bible at work but you hide it in a drawer so no one can see it. Are you kind of like an undercover Christian? Are you in the Secret Service for God? Is that the way you roll? God doesn’t want us to be undercover Christians. He wants us to live it, and to be willing to share it, but not obnoxiously.

I remember being ashamed of the gospel as a new Christian. I share this story from time to time. Here I was as a new believer and I was still struggling with partying and promiscuity, just feeling like a schizophrenia individual. I wanted to please God but at the same token I still wanted to live my own way. And I remember poignantly just staring at a mirror one night as I was getting dressed to go out. I knew I was going out to a party and I knew I was going to go do some raging and get hammered. And I used to wear this cross around my neck. It was a good sized cross about two inches long. And by day I wore that cross shamelessly, but when the night came and I knew that I was going to go out and party, I would take that cross and I would tuck it underneath my shirt, as if to say I would be ashamed to be represented as a Christian that night. I was going to live my own way.

And maybe that is you hiding out your Christianity, going undercover. And I would say to you, God’s heart for us would be to say what Paul did, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” And it begs the question - why was Paul not ashamed of the gospel? Well, he gives us a reason why. It is because it has the power to transform people by saving them. He says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

Now, there are a couple of things that we can see in this idea. First of all we should not be ashamed of the gospel because the gospel is good news. And we shouldn’t be ashamed of the gospel because it has the power to transform people by saving them. Now the word saved in that culture would primarily be used as physical rescue, but Paul and the New Testament writers insert the theologically meaning of ‘soul rescue,’ that our
souls need to be saved, that our souls are sick. He says he is not ashamed of the gospel because it has the power to transform.

Now the Greek word for power is *dunamis* and it is an explosive term. I mean it is a term that is powerful, and it can be a sudden explosion leading to absolute powerful transformation. Paul would have experienced this *dunamis*, this power, because he was on the Damascus Road and he would was determined to use his own power to eradicate the gospel. But the gospel got ahold of him with a fresh power as Jesus grabbed his heart and *dunamis* exploded suddenly in his life. Paul experienced the power of God, but that power was not just mere power for powers sake; it was power that led to transformation. He went from persecuting Christians to proclaiming Jesus, along with other Christians. And that is what the gospel does, it transforms us. II Corinthians Chapter 5 and verse 17 says, “*If anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation, the old things are gone away; behold all things have become new.*”

And that is what happens. Salvation is not just a golden ticket for Heaven. Salvation begins the moment we place our faith in Jesus, and once we place our faith in Him, *dunamis* happens, and explosive life change begins to happen. And then out of that transformation, out of that metamorphosis, God begins to do a deep work in our lives. Out of a glad gratitude that God forgives us in Jesus, that He wipes away our guilt, that He cleanses us, something powerful happens in our hearts where we then want to leak this good news out to others, to live missionally, and to be eager to share. That is what is supposed to happen in our lives.

So when you remember placing your faith in Jesus, can you look back to that moment and see how God has changed your life? God has changed your life if you are truly a Christian, so guess what, you have a story to tell. If you are a Christian you have a testimony. If you are a believer God wants you to leak Jesus. He did not save you just to get you to Heaven. He saved you to change you and for you to tell others how to get there as well. It transforms us.

Paul knew this and how it can happen so suddenly. I love the story about C. S. Lewis, the great Atheist from Cambridge and Oxford who became a Christian. He became a great apologist in the 20th century. One day C. S. Lewis was thinking through his beliefs, and he gets in the sidecar of his brother’s motorcycle and they go to the zoo. C. S. Lewis gets out of the sidecar and he realizes that he became a Christian suddenly. He said, “*All I know is I got into the sidecar as an Atheist, and I got out of the sidecar believing in Jesus.*” It happens like that.

Charles Spurgeon walked out in a snowstorm as a confused young teenager. He goes into a little church where the preacher hadn’t shown up that day because of the bad storm. So a guest speaker got up and he preached from Isaiah, “*Look unto me.*” And he
looked out at young Spurgeon and said, “Young man, you look miserable.” Spurgeon knew that was true, but he wasn’t acquainted with people telling him that publicly. The guest speaker told Spurgeon to look unto Jesus, and he put fresh eyes on the cross. Spurgeon’s heart melted, and when he left that day and walked out into the white snowstorm he knew that his heart was now as white as the snow before the eyes of God. He had been declared righteous with *dunamis* as he believed in the power of God and he was transformed.

Here is what I will tell you. That can happen to you right here in this room right now. You came to church this morning and maybe you feel aimless, you feel guilty, you feel confused, you wonder what your purpose in life is. Maybe you can’t figure life out, and God doesn’t make any sense to you. And then all of a sudden like an unexpected earthquake, your soul begins to shake and you feel as though the great God of Heaven is hunting you down with love. All of a sudden you could be sitting in here and even though you can’t see the wind, but you can feel its presence, God’s presence whispers into your soul, saying, ‘*I love you, release your life to me. I will transform you.*’ The question is will you run to Him, will you receive Him, will you look to Him?

So we should not be ashamed of the gospel because it has the power to transform people by saving them. And we also shouldn’t be ashamed of the gospel because it saves people without distinction. Paul says, “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.*” The good news is for everyone who believes. “*To the Jew first and also to the Greek.*” And to the Greek means to the Gentiles. What is that all about? Well, the promises first came to the Jews, and then it was to spread through them to the Gentiles, which is all other peoples. And everyone who believes can experience this.

Now what are the qualifications for experiencing the gospel? It is belief. And we are not talking about mere mental assent, but entrusting your life, like living it. And this particular book of Romans has absolutely transformed people. It transformed Augustine’s life in the 5th century when he overheard what he thought were children while he was in the garden. They were saying, ‘*Take up and read, take up and read.*’ And then he realized there were no children there, and he came to believe that God told him to take up and read. So he picked up the Bible and he opened to the book of Romans and his life was transformed.

John Wesley was standing in London at Aldersgate and he heard the preface of Martin Luther’s commentary on Romans being read. And he felt his heart strangely warmed. Martin Luther experienced transformation in Romans as well. John Calvin, who ministered in Geneva, Switzerland, said of Romans, “*It is an entrance to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture.*” The treasure is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, and it is for everyone.
Whether you are rich or poor, black or white, young or old, whether you are a drunk, a prostitute, a doctor or someone who feels they have their life all together, you need to realize the gospel is *dunamis* for you when you entrust your life to Him.

Secondly, we need to recognize the source of the gospel’s power. What is the source of the power of the gospel? Let’s check it out in verse 17. *“For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, The righteous shall live by faith.”* For in it - in what? In the good news, in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. So the gospel has something to do with the righteousness of God, and that is the good news; the bad news is we are unrighteous. The good news is God is sinless; the bad news is we are sinful.

In the gospel, when the good news collides with the bad news, that is where God, the righteous one meets us in our unrighteousness and He counts unto us righteousness for those who believe. We don’t earn our own righteousness; we can’t attain our own righteousness. Rather we believe God is righteous and we ask Him to pardon us, and then the great exchange happens. Jesus died in our place and is treated as unrighteous after living a perfectly righteous life, so that through faith in Him we can experience being declared righteous in God’s sight.

And it is a positional righteousness. When you believe on Him, you are declared righteous at that very moment, so that if anything were to happen to you, now as a believer you would go into God’s presence in Heaven. But it is also a progressive righteousness because as long as we are on earth God leaves us here for two reasons. You are fit for Heaven if you are a believer because He looks at you as being white as snow, but there are two reasons that we are left here on earth as Christians, and that is to grow in the image of Christ and to share the message of Christ. And so the more we grow in the image of Christ the more impact we will have in sharing the message of Christ. We are counted as righteous but we need to practice that righteousness in daily life conforming to the person of Jesus, and then ultimately in Heaven we will be complete and perfect in righteousness. We will live in a place that has forever good news when you read the headlines in Heaven.

Folks, God is the gospel. He is the good news. The righteousness of God is revealed, and it is revealed in particular in Jesus. Jesus is the gospel. He is the good news. The gospel is not an it, the gospel is not a thing, the gospel is Jesus and it is a relationship. It is not a religion, it is not performance. Maybe you would ask if we are saved by works. Yes, we are saved by works - by the works of Jesus Christ on the cross. And He said, “*It is finished,*” from the cross. We are not saved by our own works, it is only through Jesus.
You are going to hear a lot about Martin Luther, because in 1517 in Wittenberg, Germany Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses at the Castle Church, his ninety-five contentions against the church. And what happened to Luther was very powerful. It has been 500 years since the Reformation, which meant to reform, to reform the gospel back to the way it once was. Protestant protestors were protesting the way the church was. What was the church doing? It was trying to get people to pay indulgences, to do their own works to obtain their own salvation.

Martin Luther, as a nonbeliever, was walking one day and a horrific storm broke out. He thought the lightning bolts were going to kill him. He was so filled with fear he cried out to St. Anne, and said “I’ll be a monk, I’ll be a monk.” At that point he went and became an Augustinian Monk, and began driving himself crazy confessing sin. He hated God because he felt as though God put a standard of righteousness that was so tall that he could never meet it. And he felt so messed up on his insides even the other monks would tell him to chill out because he was constantly confessing everything. And he grew to hate God.

It would be like me standing at the top of the Empire State Building putting a basketball hoop up and shouting down, ‘Hey, slam dunk this, guys.’ And the guys would feel judged and ridiculed because they were unable to slam dunk and do the impossible. Guess what - we can’t do the impossible. We can’t obtain our own righteousness. We can’t slam dunk a basketball on the top of the Empire State Building. Jesus pulled off the slam dunk for us, and our trust and faith is in Him.

Martin Luther would say this about his experience: “Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God, which is the righteousness of God, and the statement that the just shall live by faith. Then I grasped the justice 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 justice of God had filled me with hate, now it became to me expressibly sweet and greater love. This passage of Paul’s became to me a gate to Heaven.”

Which passage was Martin Luther referring to? It was Romans Chapter 1 and verse 17. He had been thinking that he had to earn that, and live that, and he knew that he never could. But when he cast his eyes upon that verse he understood the righteousness of God. Once he realized the truth he knew he needed to place his faith and truth in His righteousness and not his own. That is when his eyes were opened and he realized that he was saved. He got mad at the church, he posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door and the Reformation began, because Martin Luther’s heartbeat was to tell people they were saved by faith alone, sola fide, by grace alone, sola gratia. And it sunk into the masses and people were able to experience something very beautiful.
In Habakkuk Chapter 4 and verse 2 we first see the phrase, “the just shall live by faith.” And then in Romans Chapter 1 and at the end of verse 17 it says, “As it is written, The righteous shall live by faith.” “For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed (the bad news is we have all sinned so Jesus came to fulfil the Law and died in our place) from faith for faith. Some would say that is talking about from the faithfulness of God to our faith placed in that faithfulness of God, or from the very beginning of placing our faith in Him all the way to the consummation of being with Him in glorification.

Those are a couple of things that people are saying, and I am content thinking those are both good statements. I don’t have to have a hard line on either one of those statements. We put our faith in the faithfulness of God and we are going to have faith to faith, so I like them both. “As it is written, The righteous shall live by faith.” Live by faith, every day, we live by faith in Him, trusting in Him.

No wonder Paul could say he was not ashamed because the gospel is good news, because the gospel saves our souls, because the gospel transforms us, because the gospel is about our relationship, and because the gospel is free and it is a gift. And Paul wasn’t ashamed of that. Now as we wrap today up let me bring out four closing questions for reflection.

The first question I would ask is this - are you eager to share the gospel, the good news, or if you are being honest do you feel a bit on the ashamed side? I would say that if you are feeling some of that, like when I was hiding my cross under my shirt when I went out partying, ask yourself what is going on there. Get behind your motives. Is it because you don’t want to be rejected? Is it because you want to fit in? Is it because you feel insecure about what to share? Be honest with yourself with those questions and then deal with them. Share that stuff with your Life Group and try to become authentic in these ways. I mean we can feel these things.

The next question I would ask is - are you willing to share the gospel even if it means some people will reject you? Because if we are going wait to share it only if we can be assured that everyone will like us, we can’t guarantee that. People aren’t going to like us even if we don’t share the gospel. I mean no one is liked by everyone, right? But are we willing to experience rejection? Now we aren’t to go out and share mean spiritedly, we need to love, to be kind, to be gracious and to back off when people don’t want to hear what we have to say. We are not to be obnoxious, but still some people won’t like what we stand for. And the gospel will always have an offense to it because it tells us that we are separated from God.

Here is another question - do the people in your life know that you are committed to being transformed for His sake, or is there undercover Christianity going on? Do the
people in your work place, in your community, your friends know that you are about living for God? Or is it kind of like an undercover deal for you? See, Paul was giving thanks because their faith was being heard about and he rejoiced in that. What would it look like on an individual level for people to be hearing about our faith?

And the final question is - if you are not a Christian what is preventing you from entrusting your life to Christ? Maybe you don’t feel sinful. Maybe you are not sure if God exists. Maybe you have certain doubts. Maybe you have been wounded by hypocrisy in the church. And I would say you need to figure out what those questions are. While you may not become a Christian, we hope you will, so I would say at least be able to explain why you are not one. Know what you believe and why.

Here’s what I would want to say about the book of Romans as I wrapped up some writing this week. The book of Romans is a book about getting the gospel right, not through moralism or licentiousness but through faith in Christ. The gospel isn’t a concept, a fairy tale or a myth. Nor is it a philosophy. The gospel is the unfathomably great news that every one of our unrighteous deeds can be forever forgiven through faith in the righteousness of Christ. Through a heart of belief the problem of guilt comes to a screeching halt when needy and desperate sinners grasp the solution that is found only through the matchless grace of Jesus Christ.

I want to wrap up with a story. Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his great book, ‘Crime and Punishment,’ shares this story about an individual by the name of Raskolnikov . And this individual is sharp, he is witty, he is a bit of a recluse but he is also someone who is handsome and highly intelligent. And he thinks that he can get away with a crime. He begins to think about pulling a crime, about being above the law. There was this elderly lady living up in the fourth floor flat. She pawned things off, and Raskolnikov felt like she was ripping people off, and he didn’t like her. So he figured out a way to deal with her. He took an axe, went up to her flat and he ended up hacking this lady to death. Not only that but when her daughter came in unexpectedly he ended up killing her also.

This crime happens at the beginning of the book, ‘Crime and Punishment.’ This man is guilty, but guess what? After the crime Dostoyevsky spends the rest of his book basically helping us to understand this guilty person’s guilt. He begins to deceive himself. He tries to act like he didn’t do anything. He tries to deny it. He tries to deceive others. He tries to minimize it. At times he is highly paranoid. Other times he says he is going to confess. And then other times he isn’t going to confess. And we see the terror of his soul, his psychological soul being tormented by guilt.

At the end, when Raskolnikov does go to confess, he is taken away to a prison camp in Siberia, and since he came clean he has to only spend eight years there and he doesn’t experience capital punishment. After he gets out of the Siberian prison camp he
will go and marry Sonia. And here is the deal. Here is an individual who lived isolated, who thought he was above the law, who was guilty, and who experienced all of the emotions of paranoia, sin, secrets, feeling trapped, remorse, heaviness and shame, all of that. And he couldn’t get well until he confessed.

But the difference between Dostoyevsky’s book, ‘Crime and Punishment,’ and the gospel that Paul writes to the Romans is this: While we are all criminals, so to speak, in God’s sight, while all of us have sinned, while all of us have fallen short of the glory of God, while all of us are guilty and know what it is like to feel these ragged emotions, the difference is Jesus took the punishment for our crimes. There was crime and there was punishment, there was sin and thankfully there was a Savior. Jesus was the Savior paying for our punishment on the cross.

And the book of Romans tells the good news that though we are guilty we don’t have to be punished, we can experience grace because Jesus was punished on our behalf. That is the gospel and in it the righteousness of God is revealed. Let’s pray.

Lord, thank you for your word. We are thankful to be off to the start of this new series in Romans, and we pray that you will use it to touch and change all of our lives. We love you and we praise you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.