

When in Rome..?

Session 1: Not ashamed of the Gospel

Timing: 30-45 minutes, then leading into ministry

Buzz groups: Suggestions are boxed, pairs or groups of 3-4 will work best

Illustrations: Suggestions are noted, but your own ideas and stories are preferable

Focus: Major on the one or two points most relevant to your group

Icebreaker: When was the last time you did something really embarrassing?!

Introduction to the series

People often think of a journey through Romans as a trek in the Himalayas, or a visit to the Louvre Musee, Paris. In each session we'll go to some of the peak/masterpiece passages. We behave out of what we believe to be true. But are all our own beliefs correct? Is "our truth" *the truth*? In Romans Paul helps us review that. And with changed understanding, we adopt changed attitudes and new behaviours. We become more like Jesus.

Introduce session 1

Romans 1:16-17 "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "the righteous will live by faith."

In these verses Paul outlines 4 foundations of Christian life that his letter will cover:

1. Live Shamelessly

"I am not ashamed of the gospel"

Key Point: Don't cave in to compromise

"Shameless" is a hit TV series about an explosive family with little self-control or care and concern for others. The title describes how those surrounding them marvel at their willful lack of civility or sense of personal responsibility. We call such people "shameless" because us moral "Christian" people feel they ought to sense shame but they don't.

In the time of the Romans, the tables were turned. Pagan society called Christians brazen, weak foolish, unethical, disloyal and traitorous. There was no shelter or security for the early church from Pagan society .

Neither was there much comfort from the Jewish community. Judaism was acceptable to Rome. Although patronizing, at least it meant that Jews could practice their religion free from persecution by the state (as long as they didn't threaten it's power). Christianity started as a Jewish sect. So the early church faced a question: should it try to remain as a sect within the Jewish religion, and therefore benefit from its umbrella of protection? But how could they do that when, for example, Jesus had been rejected, condemned as a heretic and killed as a criminal by Judaism's top leadership? On top of that, many Gentiles were now following Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit, such that it didn't seem necessary to become a Jew at all!

Christians in Rome were between a rock and a hard place, despised on both sides. In AD 64 Emperor Nero would blame them for the great fire that destroyed the city, leading to the widespread persecution and expulsion of the city.

So to become a Christian in Rome was a big decision. So Paul writes them a letter to encourage them and give them some wisdom on how to live within that kind of society.

Application: Share a personal story about a time when you stepped out and shared what you really believe with someone, and their favourable reaction that wasn't as bad as you thought beforehand.

2. Get the Good News

"the gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes"

The Point: "gospel" means "good news". Do we understand why the gospel is good news?

→ summarizing what we believe can be quite hard

Buzzgroups: Try it now in pairs. What is the Good News?

→ Paul highlights 4 things in this verse:

- (i) it's about God's power, not human religion or understanding = *The Power of God*
- (ii) the core message is about being rescued and restored = *salvation*
- (iii) it's for everyone not a special group = *everyone*
- (iv) it's received by believing, not rewarded on the basis of our performance = *who believes*

Illustration: share which aspects of these 4 aspects you find most challenging and why

Application: Are you able to clearly articulate what you believe and why? Try writing it down in a few simple sentences. Perhaps invite people to do this as an individual exercise on a post-it.

3. See the Goal of the Gospel

"For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed..."

The Point: the goal for us is to be in a right relationship with God (righteousness)– everything else flows from that – he loves us and wants us to know Him.

Anon *"If you don't know where you're going any road will get you there"*

Bill Hybels (*Courageous Leadership*) *"Vision is a picture of the future that produces passion"*.

The strongest visions motivate us and direct our entire being. These verses tell us what motivated the apostle Paul.

"righteousness" is mentioned 232 times in the NIV Bible, as perhaps the central attribute of God's character that people either emulate, or fall way short of. It has three aspects of meaning:

- (i) right, loyal, good, covenant relationship (see Genesis 15:6; 18:19; Galatians 3:5-7)
- (ii) godly ethical behavior – fulfillment of the demands of relationship, e.g. monogamy in marriage
- (iii) being sure of the verdict of God on our lives, (he is both lawgiver and judge), our standing before Him.

Is a right relationship with God really our strongest desire and what we give our utmost efforts to pursue?

Illustration: share some of your own battles, some of the alternative ends that you tend to pursue. Then share about why the classic spiritual disciplines are so important in your own life to constantly pull you back on track.

Buzzgroups: Honesty time! In pairs share which spiritual discipline (prayer, worship, bible study, rest, fasting, etc) is currently your greatest success and which you find the greatest challenge.

4. Live by faith

“...righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “the righteous will live by faith.”

The Point: How do we receive the good news? How do we achieve the goal of righteousness? How do we get right with God and know Him?

→ Through Jesus, God is making his own godliness available to us. We can live in a right relationship with God, becoming like him in character. See 1 Peter 2:24

→ The historical events of Jesus’ death and resurrection. They only can have any impact on us today if we believe those events have a timeless significance. To believe that is faith

→ But is faith just about beliefs, in other words inner thoughts? Is that what “faith” means?

→ No! US best-selling author Jim Wallis says “faith is personal, but it is never private”. There’s always a public outworking of genuine, authentic, biblical faith. It cannot but result in good works (see James 2:14-26).

So, we *live by faith*, not just believe the right things. We know God and live differently as a result.

Illustration: Share a story in your own life about how your motivation for doing good works changed when you realized that you could do them out of love for God, and do them with him through relationship, rather than on your own. Perhaps you found that you began to do them as an act of worship – in response to God’s love – rather than as a means of getting his (or others’) approval.

Ideas for Ministry

- Pray to end, incorporating the key scripture for this session. Start by thanking God, say sorry for any failings that have been identified, and ask God to help us understand and to change. Importantly, ask the Holy Spirit to come and bring healing, encouragement and revelation.