

Lesson 15 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 1:16, Continued

Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Question #6: Who is included in “everyone who believes”? What does it mean to believe? How is belief related to faith (which is mentioned three times in the very next verse)?

With this question we must add another key word to our list: **believe**. And, of course, our first step with a new key word is always the same: we must define it. What does it mean to believe?

As always, our plan is to let the Bible define the word. And I think the first thing the Bible tells us about the word “believe” is that it has more than one meaning, and we need to examine the context to determine the meaning in any specific instance.

For example, consider the meaning of the word “believe” in the following verses from the book of John.

John 3:36 — Whoever **believes** in the Son has eternal life; **whoever does not obey** the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

John 8:31-32 — So Jesus said to the Jews who had **believed** him, “**If you abide in my word**, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

John 12:42-43 — Nevertheless, many even of the authorities **believed** in him, but for fear of the Pharisees **they did not confess it**, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

John 14:1-2 — Let not your hearts be troubled. **Believe** in God; **believe** also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

I think we see four different meanings of “believe” in those four verses.

- In John 3:36, we see believers who are obedient believers — those who **believe** have eternal life, but those who do not **obey** shall not see life. In that verse, believing is the opposite of disobeying.
- In John 8:31-32, we see believers who believed as a past event — “the Jews who **had believed** in him” — but that past event of believing was not enough for them to be a disciple of Christ because Jesus said, “**if you abide in my word**, you are truly my disciples.”
- In John 12:42-43, we see believers with just a mental acknowledgment that something was true — but not believers who experienced any change of heart (“they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God”) or who obeyed God (“they did not confess it”).

- In John 14:1, we see a command to believe that is really a command to trust or to rely on God and on the promises of God — trusting that Jesus has a place prepared for us.

Yes, there is some overlap, but I think each of those examples shows us a different meaning of “believe.” And I do not think those four examples exhaust all of the meanings and shades of meaning of the word “believe” in the Bible.

But, for our purpose here, I think we can focus on just two of those meanings of “believe” that we saw in John — believing that saves (John 3:36), and believing that does not save (John 12:42-43).

What is the difference between believing that saves and believing that does not save? We can answer that question with a single word: obedience! A saved believer is an obedient believer. The believers in John 3:36 are obedient believers, but the believers in John 12:42-43 are not.

A saved believer is an obedient believer — and that statement should not be controversial. In fact, I think we all understand it in other areas of life:

- The building is on fire. Head for the emergency exit!
- That pan is hot. Don’t touch it!
- The bridge is out. Turn around!
- The hurricane is coming. Evacuate!

I might very well believe those statements, but that belief alone will not save me. Absent some action on my part, I will die in that fire; I will get burned by that pan; I will drive off that bridge; and I will get swept away by that hurricane.

I think we all understand that in those other areas of life. So why is it that in the area of religion people suddenly act as if believing alone, without any corresponding action, will somehow save us?

- You are dead in your sins. Be baptized!

How is that statement different from those other statements? As with those other statements, I might very well believe this one, but that belief alone will not save me. Absent some action on my part I will die in my sins.

And isn't this all exactly what Jesus told us?

Mark 16:16 — Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

And, again, don't we understand that in other areas of life? Whoever believes the bridge is out and turns around will be saved, but whoever does not believe the bridge is out will be killed.

That is not hard to understand with the danger of missing bridges. But, why then do so many people not understand it when it comes to the danger of sin?

The answer to that question is, sadly, and once again, John Calvin.

Calvinism teaches that God divided the world into the elect and the non-elect long before anyone was born. And if you are in non-elect

group, then there is nothing you or anyone else or even God can do to save you.

And, if that is the case, then it follows that, if you are among the elect, you need do nothing to be saved. You are in effect already saved. That is why they teach that God supernaturally softens your heart and regenerates you so that you will choose Christ. Not so that you **can** choose Christ, but so that you **will** choose Christ. If you are among the elect, then you are saved whether or not you want to be saved. You don't have any choice in the matter. God has chosen for you.

But, once we throw that nonsense out the window, what we are left with is exactly what Jesus told us.

Mark 16:16 — Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

And note the word that Jesus uses there — “**whoever!**” **Whoever** believes and is baptized! What Jesus told us is very different from what John Calvin told us!

And we can also look at what Peter said in Acts 2 in response to the question, “what must we do?” John Calvin answers “**nothing,**” but that is not how Peter answered that question:

Acts 2:37-38 — Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

What Peter told us is very different from what John Calvin told us!

So, if a saved believer is an obedient believer, then what kind of believers do we see here in verse 16? Just read it! We see saved believers, which means that these believers in verse 16 must be obedient believers.

But, some might ask, where is baptism in verse 16? It is right there in that word “believes”! Those believers are saved believers, and we know that saved believers are obedient believers. The believers in Romans 1:16 believe what Jesus said we must do to have our sins washed away — and they have obeyed Jesus. That is what it means to be an obedient believer — we believe what Jesus says, and we do it!

If we do not obey Christ, then we are not a saved believer. We are, instead, like those believers in John 12 who refused to confess Christ for fear of the Pharisees. They were believers, but they were not obedient believers. They were not saved believers (Matthew 10:33).

When we open the Bible, what we find is that sometimes believing and being baptized are considered separately, such as in Mark 16:16 — “whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.” But, very often, what we find is that the word “believe” is used as a shorthand for all that one does to obey the gospel. When I obey the gospel, I become a Christian (Acts 11:26), or we could say that I become a believer (1 Peter 1:21).

In short, sometimes “believer” in the Bible means “obedient believer.” Let’s look at some examples of that as shown on the Handout for Lesson 15.

John 3:16 is, perhaps, the best known verse in the Bible, but I wish the rest of John 3 was equally well known!

Does the word “believe” in John 3:16 include obedience? Yes, it does. And we can see that just by backing up a few verses.

In John 3:14, the text refers to the strange event in Numbers 21 where God sent serpents among the people. After they prayed for deliverance, God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and to set it on a pole so that “everyone who is bitten, **when he sees it**, shall live.”

Now here is the big question: were they healed when they mentally believed they would be healed, or were they healed only after they obeyed God and looked at the serpent?

We all know the answer to that question — “everyone who is bitten, **when he sees it**, shall live.” The believers who were healed in Numbers 21 were the obedient believers. They were the ones who both believed what Moses said and who then acted in response to what Moses said. They were the ones who obeyed what God had required of them to be saved from those serpents.

Likewise, the believers who are saved in John 3:16 are the obedient believers. They are the ones who not only believe what Jesus said, but who acted in response to what Jesus said. The believers in John 3:16 are the obedient believers.

And that understanding of verse 16 is confirmed by the verse at the very end of John 3.

John 3:36 — Whoever **believes** in the Son has eternal life; whoever **does not obey** the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Whoever believes has eternal life, but whoever does not obey shall not see life. In light of that verse, can anyone argue that the belief in verse 16 excludes obedience?

And one more point about John 3:16 — the word “believes” in that verse is a present tense participle, meaning one who keeps on believing. The believers in John 3:16 are experiencing a continuous life of faithful obedience; they are not experiencing a one-time mental act as they sit in front of their first century television set.

We see the same thing in Acts 2. In verse 37, Peter’s listeners believe him and ask what they must do. In verse 38, Peter tells them: they must repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins. And then how is that same group described in verse 44? As “all who **believed**.” Could they have been described as believers if they had disobeyed the first thing God told them to do?

And we see it again in Acts 14. In verse 1, we find that “a great multitude both of Jews and of Greeks **believed**.” But we see a different group in verse 2: “the Jews that were **disobedient**.” The opposite of the believers in verse 1 were the disobedient in verse 2.

The text of Acts 14:2 on the Handout is from the American Standard Version. The English Standard Version instead has the word “unbelieving” in place of “disobedient” in verse 2. Which translation is correct?

The best way to determine the meaning of a word in the first century is to find examples of how that word was used in the first century. The New Testament, of course, provides us many such examples, but so, too, do papyri and inscriptions from the first century.

When Moulton and Milligan did that analysis in their book “Vocabulary of the Greek Testament,” here is what they concluded about that Greek word in Acts 14:2: “That this [word] connotes invariably ‘disobedience, rebellion, ...’ is made abundantly clear from papyri and inscriptions.” And then they give many examples from that same time period, including the disobedient paying fines, the disobedient being imprisoned, the disobedient disobeying orders, and the disobedient disobeying the terms in a will.

They conclude by saying this: “We have not sought for more instances, but it has seemed desirable to give rather plentiful illustration to prove a case which is very important for doctrine.” The word means disobedient, as it is translated in the ASV, and, in Acts 14, disobedient is the opposite of believing.

We see the same thing in Acts 16 with the Philippian jailer. He and his family were told to “believe.” And so they were baptized at once. And then how were they described? As those who “had believed.” Those believers were saved believers only because they were obedient believers.

And we see it again in Acts 19. In verse 2, Paul asked some disciples whether they had received the Holy Spirit when they **believed**. They answered no, and so Paul then asked them into what had they been **baptized**. Paul did not ask them if they had been baptized, but instead Paul just assumed they had been baptized. Paul viewed their baptism as part of their believing. There was no question in Acts about whether someone who believed had been baptized. Of course they had been baptized — they had believed!

In each of those examples, what we find is that a saved believer is an obedient believer. And obedient believers are the only kind of believers who are saved. James tells us about disobedient believers.

James 2:19 — You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder!

James 2:26 — For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

And Jesus tells us that believing is not just a mental process.

John 6:28-29 — Then they said to him, “**What must we do, to be doing the works of God?**” Jesus answered them, “This is the **work** of God, that you **believe** in him whom he has sent.”

The faith that saves is an obedient faith, and the believers who are saved are obedient believers.

But that raises another question — what is the difference between belief and faith?

The Greek words translated believe, faith, and faithful are just different forms of the same Greek word. “Believe” is the verb form (pisteuo), “faith” is the noun form (pistis), and “faithfulness” is the adjective form (pistos).

If someone asked us to come up with the noun that corresponds to the verb “believe,” I suspect that most of us would choose the noun “belief” for that corresponding noun. We believe (verb), and we have a belief (noun). But “belief” is not the corresponding noun that our English Bibles chose — instead our English Bibles chose the noun “faith.”

In fact, there is only one verse in the entire ESV Bible that contains the English word “belief,” and that verse is 2 Thessalonians 2:13 (“belief in the truth” rather than “faith in the truth”) — but the Greek word translated “belief” in that verse is the same Greek word translated “faith” almost everywhere else.

Why do I bring this up? Please look at the Handout for Lesson 15. Now is the time for us to take the quiz at the top of that page!

Believe is to Belief as WHAT is to Faith?

I believe (verb) and have a belief (noun). The verb “believe” corresponds with the noun “belief.” But what English verb corresponds with the noun “faith?” What verb goes in that blank?

As it turns out, there is no verb form of the word “faith” in English. English has the verb “to believe” but English does not have the verb “to faith.” “Faithing” and “faithed” are not words!

That is why our English Bibles use “believe” for the verb form of faith. But, and here is the key point, our English Bibles could just as easily have chosen the verb “trust” for that same purpose. And, in fact, the ESV does just that several times, using the word “entrust” for the same Greek word translated “believe” almost everywhere else. (See Luke 16:11, John 2:24, 1 Corinthians 9:17, Galatians 2:7, 1 Thessalonians 2:4, 1 Timothy 1:11, and Titus 1:3.)

There is no exact fit in English for the verb form of the Greek word translated “faith.” If we could use two verbs we might choose “trust and obey,” but there is no single English verb that directly corresponds with the noun “faith.”

And the converse is also true. In place of the translation “faith” in the English Bible, the translators could have chosen the word “belief” instead (as the ESV does in 2 Thessalonians 2:13).

But I suspect we would all see an immediate problem with that translation — our English word “belief” is just too lightweight; it is too suggestive of mere mental agreement; it does not convey the sense of trust, reliance, commitment, and obedience that is a part of the underlying Greek word.

After all, which translation do we prefer? “Faith is the victory” or “belief is the victory?” I suspect we all prefer “faith is the victory,” and for good reason. “Faith” is a much weightier word than “belief.”

But if we say that about the word “belief” as a replacement for the noun “faith,” then what can we say about the most common choice — “believe” — as the verb form of the same noun “faith”?

I think what we can say is that “believe” is about as weighty a word as “belief.” I think we can say that “believe” likewise often fails to capture the underlying idea of trust, reliance, commitment, and obedience that is a part of the Greek word. I think the verb “believe” likewise can be too lightweight and too suggestive of mere mental assent. In short, I think “believe” very often suffers from the same problem as “belief” — it just doesn’t fully capture the meaning of the Greek word. I think we can all see that with the noun (“belief”), but do we all see that with the verb (“believe”)?

How many people in this world today have staked their eternal destiny on that particular choice of an English word for the verb form of “faith”? Many today see that word “believe” in their English Bible,

and they then think that all they need to do is just think to themselves that Jesus is Lord, and then suddenly they are saved. Just think the right thought! There is nothing you must do; there is nothing you can do. Just believe!

But there is nothing in the underlying Greek to suggest such a thing! Those who do that are stripping away all of the trust, all of the reliance, all of the commitment, and all of the obedience in that Greek word translated “believe”!

If faith (the noun) without works is dead, then believing (the verb) without works is just as dead. What James says about the noun is also true about the verb. God wants us to have an obedient working faith and to be obedient working believers.

And, so, where are we? When it comes to believing and faith in the process of conversion as those words are used in the Bible, what can we say?

- “Believe” is the verb — it is something we do.
- “Faith” is the noun — it is something we have.
- “Faithful” is the adjective — it is something we are.

When I hear the gospel, believe the gospel, and obey the gospel — then that obedient believing is the verb that I do.

When I arise from the watery grave of baptism as a new creature, trusting and relying only on God, then that obedient faith is the noun that I have.

And while I have that obedient faith, walking in the light, then I am faithful — that is the adjective that describes me.

In Greek, they are different forms of the same word. And that ends our grammar lesson, at least for now.

We have three questions remaining about verse 16.

Questions #7-9: Why does Paul mention the Jews and the Gentiles separately? Why does Paul list the Jews and the Gentiles in that specific order? Is this verse the theme of the entire letter?

I want us to look at these three questions together because I think they are all related to what we said in the introduction about the theme of Romans. I think they are all related to the question of whether there is a single unifying theme that ties the entire letter together, explaining both the content and the order of the content in Romans.

Many commentaries point to verse 16 as the theme of the entire letter, and I agree it is a major theme — but is it the central unifying theme of the letter? Many say yes, but I'm not so sure.

Let's consider another possibility — a possibility that also looks to verse 16 for the central theme of Romans, but a possibility that looks, not to beginning of verse 16, but to the end of verse 16. "To the Jew first and also to the Greek."

Even here, in this wonderful verse about the power of the gospel, Paul addresses the Jews and the Gentiles separately. If there was anywhere in this letter where we might expect Paul to say everyone who believes **period**, it would be right here. But Paul does not say

that. Instead, Paul says, “everyone who believes, **to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**” Why?

Was it because there was great tension between the Jews and the Greeks in the church at Rome? Were they worshiping separately? Were they fighting? Had they become armed camps? Paul had not been there yet, but we know that Paul had heard reports about Rome — he told us that in verse 8. What reports had Paul heard about the Jews and the Gentiles in Rome?

And, again, we need to remember the history of the church in Rome. The church in Rome had started out exclusively Jewish, but had then become a mixture of Jew and Gentile until the edict of Claudius, at which point it very quickly became exclusively Gentile. And then, when Claudius died, the church in Rome again became a mixture of Jew and Gentile. That is a lot of turmoil! And we can add to all of that turmoil the usual tension that existed between Jew and Gentile, as we see in Paul’s other epistles. And here in verse 16 Paul addresses them separately.

I think what we may discover is that the single unifying theme of Romans is the theme of peace and unity in the body of Christ, especially between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. And perhaps that theme explains why verse 16 specifically addresses those two groups. Paul wants them all to know that the power of the gospel is for all — and that the one gospel makes us all one in Christ through the power of God. We are all added to the one church when we obey the gospel. If there is fighting between Jew and Gentile in Rome, then the gospel is the solution to that problem.

But why does Paul say that the Jews were first?

Well, that is simply a historical fact — the Jews in Acts 2 were the first to hear the gospel, the first to obey the gospel and the first to be added to the kingdom of Christ. And that historical fact was also a prophesied fact:

Isaiah 2:3 — For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

But I think Paul has another reason for saying that here, and it is a reason related to a major part of his letter: Romans 9-11.

In those three chapters, Paul will discuss the special role that the Jews played in God's plan of redemption — not a special plan for the Jews, but a special role played by the Jews in the one plan of God. And I think Paul is just laying the groundwork here in verse 16 for that later discussion in chapters 9-11.

Paul did that in verse 3 by mentioning King David, and I think Paul is doing the same thing here by noting that the gospel was proclaimed first to the Jews.

Romans 1:17

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.”

I know we spent a lot of time on verse 16, but I hope no one expects us to pick up speed here in verse 17! After all, this one short verse not only quotes Habakkuk, but it also mentions “faith” three times in three different ways (from faith, for faith, and by faith). We need to take our time with verse 17!

To begin, let's note that verse 17 starts with the connecting word "for." What that means is that verse 17 is an explanation for something that Paul said in verse 16, and I think it is easy to see that verse 17 is an explanation for why the gospel is the power of God for salvation. Verse 17 tells us that the gospel is the power of God for salvation because in it (in the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith.

But what does that explanation mean? What is the righteousness of God? How is the righteousness of God revealed by the gospel? And what does Paul mean when he says, "from faith for faith"?

Let's start with the word "revealed." What does Paul mean when he says that the righteousness of God is *revealed* in the gospel?

That word "revealed" comes from the Greek word *apokalypto*, which means to reveal or to uncover. It is the same Greek word that gives us the name of the book of Revelation and that gives us the word "Apocalypse."

What does that word "reveal" mean here? There are two primary ways to understand it.

First, the word "reveal" can simply mean to make something known.

For example, if you did not know my middle name, and I told you my middle name, then it could be said that I had revealed my middle name to you. I made that fact known to you. In this case, the word "reveal" just means to inform someone about something.

But, second, the word "reveal" can instead mean to create something new that did not previously exist so that it can now be seen or heard.

For example, a judge may reveal a verdict, a company may reveal a new product, the lottery commission may reveal the winning numbers, or a chef may reveal tonight's special desert. Here the word "reveal" does not just mean to tell us something — instead it means to create something and then to show us that thing.

So which is it here? Does the gospel just tell us about the righteousness of God? Or does the gospel both create the righteousness of God and then show it to us?