

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 17, 2016**

AN ILLUSTRATION OF FAITH

Romans 4:1-17

INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday, in our study of the Letter to the Romans, we looked at Paul's blockbuster gospel message in Romans 3 that though we are all sinners who fall short of the glory of God (3:23) and justly deserve God's righteous wrath because of our sin, God Himself has taken the initiative to deal with the problem of our sin and to restore us to a right relationship with Him. As Paul says, He has "justified [us] freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus," whom "God presented ... as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in His blood," shed on the cross where He gave His life for us (3:24-25).

"Justified" means to be pronounced not guilty, to be declared righteous in the sight of God. Being justified means that God treats me "just as if I'd never sinned." It means, as David happily declares in Psalm 103, that God "does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (103:10). This justification before God is not due to anything you or I have done to deserve His favor, nor to anything we could ever do to earn it. It is a pure gift. It is all by grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. This grace-gift of justification can only be received through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone and His saving work on our behalf. There is no other way to receive it, no other way to be declared righteous in God's sight, no other way to get right and be right with God.

This is the game-changing message Paul presents in Romans 3:21-31. It is, as we noted last week, "the very essence of the gospel ... the very sum and substance of the good news ... the very heart of the Christian message" (Charles Erdman, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 57).

Today, and next Sunday as well, we will look at how Paul uses the life story of the Jewish patriarch Abraham in Romans 4, along with an illustration from the life of Israel's King David, to support and confirm the gospel message. So, let's look together at God's Word as it comes to us in Romans 4:1-17. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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Do you remember *Saving Private Ryan*, Steven Spielberg's epic war drama set in World War II? Following the Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944, Army Ranger Captain John Miller, the character portrayed by Tom Hanks, and his squad are given a mission to find and "save" Private 1st Class James Ryan, a paratrooper whose three brothers have all been killed in action. It is a dangerous mission. After successfully finding Ryan in France, Captain Miller takes command of the small group of paratroopers who are defending a bridge from German attack. In the ensuing combat, Miller is shot and mortally wounded by a German soldier. As he is dying, his last words, spoken to Private Ryan, have to do with the extraordinary lengths

he and his squad have gone to in their mission to save him. He says: “James, earn this. Earn it.”

In the film’s final scene, a now-elderly Ryan is standing at Miller’s grave in the American Cemetery at Normandy. Ryan seeks reassurance from his wife that he has led a good life, that he is a good man, and that he is worthy of the sacrifice made by Miller and his squad to “save” him. To which his wife replies, “You are.”

It is a profoundly moving film that shows the horrors of war and the enormity of the sacrifices made by millions in the “Greatest Generation” who served with courage and honor. At the same time, the burden with which Private Ryan lived his entire life after the war, the charge from Captain Miller to “earn this,” is exactly the opposite of the gospel message. It is the anti-gospel. We do not receive justification – the status of a right relationship with God – because we have earned it. Nor are we given the impossible task of proving ourselves worthy or deserving of it.

When you look at the cross and you think of Jesus hanging there, you do not hear Jesus say: “Earn this.” He does not say: “Prove that you deserve the sacrifice I’m making for you.” No! He says: “I volunteered for this. You don’t have to do anything to earn it. You *can’t* do anything to earn it. It is a gift of my love. All you need to do is to receive it by trusting in me. Receive it by faith in me.”

To drive home this transformational truth to the Christians in Rome of both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, Paul appeals to the example of Abraham, the “founding father” of the Jewish people. Abraham was esteemed as the greatest of the Jewish patriarchs, and held up as the example par excellence of a godly character and virtuous life. Abraham, or Abram as he was earlier known, is first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 11. Along with Sarah (or Sarai) his wife, his nephew Lot, and his father Terah, Abraham leaves his home and people in Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan. But when they have gone about halfway, they settle in a place called Haran, where they remain until the death of Terah (11:27-32). Genesis 12 records God’s call to Abraham to leave his country and people behind to go to Canaan, which God promises to give to Abraham’s descendants (12:1-3, 6-7). So, taking God at His word, Abraham, at the age of 75, with Sarah and Lot, sets out from Haran and journeys to Canaan.

The promises of God to Abraham, with respect to both the land and Abraham’s posterity, come into sharper focus in Genesis 13 and 15. At the time of Genesis 15, Abraham is in the promised land, but as of yet he has no children, and time, as he sees it, has either run out or is about to. In response to Abraham’s fretting in prayer about his lack of offspring, the Lord tells Abraham that He (the Lord) will give Abraham a son from his own body to be his heir (15:4). To confirm this promise, the Lord has Abraham go outside and look up at the heavens, telling him he will have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (15:5). Then, the Scripture says: “Abraham believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness” (15:6).

Abraham *believed* God. He *accepted* God's promise. He *trusted* God to do what He said He would do. This, the Scripture says, is the basis on which God declared Abraham righteous in His sight. On the basis of his faith.

This, of course, is not the end of Abraham's story. Years go by without the promise of a son being fulfilled. In their impatience with God, Abraham and Sarah decide to take matters into their own hands. They agree that Abraham should try to have a son with Hagar, Sarah's maidservant. Sure enough, when Abraham is 86, Hagar bears him a son, Ishmael (16:1-16). But Ishmael is not the son of God's promise to Abraham.

Still later, when Abraham is 99, God renews His promise of a son to Abraham, and institutes circumcision as the sign of His covenant with Abraham and his descendants to come. So Abraham, Ishmael, and every male in his household undergo circumcision (17:1-27).

Not long after this, the Lord appears again to Abraham, promising that Sarah would give birth to a son in the coming year (18:1-10). Which is exactly what happens, as it says in Genesis 21: "Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what He had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac (which means, 'he laughs') to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him" (21:1-5).

There are other momentous events in the life of Abraham, but this is enough to give you a flavor of his relationship with God. The reason Paul appeals to the life and experience of Abraham is because, in the eyes of most Jews, Abraham was the epitome of righteousness and had a special relationship with God because of his righteous acts and godly character. They would have said that, if anyone could be justified in God's sight by good works, it was Abraham. But Paul repudiates the idea that Abraham or anyone else (with the exception of Jesus) could ever be declared righteous before God on the basis of good works or moral virtue or impeccable piety.

How does Paul do it? First of all, notice that Paul makes his case on the basis of what the Bible says. He is right up front with his appeal to the Scripture. Look at verse 3. He says: "What does the Scripture say?" And then he quotes directly from Genesis 15:6: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

I don't know if this is intuitively obvious or not, but this is a really, really important point. Where does Paul turn for authoritative guidance in his theology and teaching? To the Bible. For Paul, and for faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ down through the centuries, the Bible was and is the final court of appeal regarding what we are to believe and how we are to live. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Bible is the final and only infallible rule of faith and practice.

Of course, not everyone today accepts the authority of the Bible. That is a given in a fallen, rebellious world. It would be a mistake for us to expect a world of unbelievers to accept the

moral and doctrinal teaching of the Bible as authoritative. It is also true that not everything in the Bible is crystal clear. Some doctrines are harder to get our minds around than others. There are some things on which sincere, Bible-believing Christians may disagree. But we ought to make it our aim to have our doctrine and our lifestyle conform as much as we can to the teaching of the Bible.

On the basis of biblical teaching, Paul argues that Abraham was not justified by his works, but on the ground of his faith (4:1-5). The word translated “credited” in the NIV (“counted” in the ESV) is the Greek word *logizomai*, which Paul uses 11 times in Romans 4 (verses 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, and 24). It can also be translated “reckoned.”

In verses 4 and 5, Paul notes two ways to have money “credited” to your account: either as wages that are earned and therefore owed to you by your employer or customer, or as a gift that is freely given, unearned and therefore not owed as an obligation or entitlement. If you have a job, you receive a paycheck based on an agreed-upon salary, or the number of hours you work, or the business you produce. It is not a gift. It is money you earn. You have worked for it. It is what you are due. It is not grace. It is compensation you have coming to you.

If the status of being justified or declared righteous in God’s sight is based on good works you have done, then it is credited to your account as something you have earned. But if it is not something you have earned, it is credited to you as a free gift of God’s grace. It must be received by faith, by a personal response of trust in the trustworthiness and reliability and sufficiency of God. The crediting of faith as righteousness, as Paul shows from the experience of Abraham, is a free gift of God’s sovereign grace. It is not earned.

In verses 6-8, Paul turns from Abraham to David, from Genesis 15 to Psalm 32. Along with Psalm 51, Psalm 32 is one of David’s prayers of confession after his sin with Bathsheba and his involvement in the death of her husband Uriah. Here David describes the blessedness of having righteousness credited to us apart from our earning it by good works, and of knowing that God does not count our sins against us when we turn to Him in true repentance and faith.

By the example of David, Paul shows that there are twin aspects of the “counting” or “crediting” in the doctrine of justification. First, we see what God does not do: He does not count our sins against us. He refuses to credit our sins against us, but pardons and removes them instead (Psalm 32:1-2; Romans 4:7-8). Second, we see what God does in fact do: He credits our account with righteousness, as a free gift, totally apart from any meritorious works on our part (Romans 4:6). Not only does He do it in the absence of good works, He does it in spite of our sin.

Both David and Abraham testify that we are justified not by works but by grace. And grace must be received for what it is: a gift.

In verses 9-12, Paul shows that, just as Abraham was not justified by his works, neither was he justified in God’s sight by circumcision. Circumcision, as we noted in our study of Romans 2, was the physical sign of God’s covenant with the Jewish people. Every Jewish

male was to be circumcised as a sign of inclusion in the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants.

In verses 9-10, Paul asks about the significance of circumcision relative to Abraham's justification (and yours and mine).

Verse 9: Is circumcision a requirement in order to be justified in God's sight? Or is justification available to the uncircumcised as well as the circumcised?

Verse 10: Was Abraham justified – credited with righteousness – in God's sight *after* he was circumcised, or *before*?

The answer to this last question is: *Before!* It was *before* his circumcision. His circumcision is recorded in Genesis 17, more than a decade after he was justified by faith in Genesis 15. His circumcision was the sign and seal of his justification, but not the basis of it.

This being the case, the answer to the question in verse 9 is clear: No, circumcision is not and cannot be a pre-requisite for being justified (or saved). Salvation is for all who believe God, for all who believe the gospel, for all who trust in Christ, whether circumcised or not. Which means that Abraham is the father not only of Jews (through Isaac) and Arabs (through Ishmael), he is the spiritual father of all who are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

Warren Wiersbe puts it this way: "If you are a Jew, you are a child of Abraham physically; but are you a child of Abraham *spiritually*? Abraham is the father of all who believe (in) Jesus Christ and are justified by faith. If you are a Gentile" – a non-Jew – "you can never be a natural descendant of Abraham; but you can be one of his *spiritual* descendants" (Wiersbe, *Be Right*, 46).

Paul is not finished yet. He proceeds in verses 13-17 to show that, just as he was not justified by works or by circumcision, neither was Abraham justified or saved by obedience to the law. Perhaps we will talk more about it next week (or perhaps not), but for now simply consider the fact that God's promise in Genesis 15:5 is given to Abraham without any conditions or requirements. God does not say: "If you do this, I will do thus." No. It is grace, not law. And Abraham received and embraced the promise by faith, not by law. He *believed* God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Romans 4:3). Add to this the fact that God's promise and Abraham's response of faith preceded the giving of the law by 430 years. In this case, you might say, timing is everything.

The witness of the Bible is clear, isn't it? God's promise came first. God's grace came first, giving birth to Abraham's response of faith. Good works, circumcision, and the law all came later.

If you want to get right and be right with God, there is only one way. You can't do it by being a good person or doing a ton of good things. You can't do it by comparing yourself to other people and coming out ahead. You can't do it by performing a lot of religious rituals

like circumcision or baptism or fasting or taking communion. You can't do it by giving lots of money to the church. You can't do it by following the law with all its do's and don'ts. You can't earn it no matter how hard you try. But Jesus says you don't have to.

The only way to be justified or declared righteous in God's sight is to receive the gift of salvation the way Abraham did, through faith in the true and living God who keeps His promises, who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that do not exist (4:17).

Do not live your life like Private Ryan, burdened with the weight of trying to prove that you are worthy, that you have earned the sacrifices of others, or the sacrifice Jesus has made for you. It is not about earning your salvation or any of the blessings of God. It is about believing God and receiving it all for what it is: a gift of grace.

Let the example of Abraham's justification by faith encourage you and fill your heart with joy as you trust in God and know that you are accepted in His sight.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.

THE GOSPEL WAY
 (Adapted from *The Valley of Vision*, 62-63)

Blessed Lord Jesus,
 No human mind could conceive or invent the gospel.
 Acting in eternal grace, You are both its messenger and its message,
 Lived out on earth through infinite compassion,
 Applying Your life to insult, injury, death,
 That we might be redeemed, ransomed, freed.

Blessed are You, O Father, for establishing this way.
 Eternal thanks to You, O Lamb of God, for opening this way.
 Praise everlasting to You, O Holy Spirit,
 For applying this way to our hearts.
 Glorious Trinity, impress the gospel on our souls,
 Until its virtue diffuses every faculty;
 Let it be heard, acknowledged, professed, felt.
 Teach us to secure this mighty blessing.
 Help us to give up every lust we hold dear,
 To submit heart and life to the power of the gospel
 To have it directing our will,
 Controlling our affections, molding our understanding,
 Ordering our lives.

Take us to the cross to seek glory from its infamy.
 Strip us of every pretense of righteousness by our own doings.
 O gracious Redeemer, we have neglected You too long,
 Often crucified You, crucified You afresh by our impenitence,
 And put You to open shame.
 We thank You for the patience that has borne with us so long,
 And for the grace that now makes us willing to be Yours.
 Unite us to Yourself with inseparable bonds,
 That nothing may ever draw us back from You, our Lord, our Savior.