

Romans
Made Righteous by Faith, not by Our Works
Romans 4:1-31
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Paul spends most of Romans chapter 1 detailing just how broken and decaying the human heart and our world is. In chapter 2 he warns the Jews, God's people, not to be judgmental and smug, because while their brokenness looks different from the Gentiles, they too are broken and decaying. In chapter 3 Paul explains that it's not keeping the law that makes anyone righteous before God. It's only as we place our faith in Jesus and receive his grace that we're made whole and are righteous before God. Toward the end of chapter 3 Paul writes some of most profound and well known words in this letter:

For **all have sinned** and fall short of the glory of God, **and all are justified** freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. – Romans 3:23 & 24

The letter we know as Romans was written primarily to Jewish people who noticed the brokenness in the world and were very critical of it, but who thought their standing as God's people to whom He gave the Law made them righteous before God. Few of us here are Jewish by birth, but since we're human, all of us can relate to what Paul is saying in Romans. Human nature leads every one of us to think we can earn God's favor by being good and doing right.

Since preparing for last Sunday's message I've been thinking a lot about our human propensity to try and earn God's favor. It occurred to me that trying to gain God's favor through our good works or good behavior results in one of 3 problems.

- 1) We strive to be good and do good and fail and then we feel hopeless. So, we try harder and fail again and repeat that cycle until we're full of despair.
- 2) We work hard to be good and do what's right, and while we're not perfect, we do pretty well and then feel prideful. We compare ourselves favorably with others and look down on those who aren't as successful at being good and doing right.
- 3) We try to be good and do right, and we do pretty well at it, but when we fail we become very adept at managing appearances and hiding our mistakes. The picture of us we show to others isn't the real us, but a carefully maintained façade designed to have others think better of us than we really are. Over time we become increasingly convinced that the image we project is who we actually are.

Do you recognize yourself in any of those scenarios? Some of us may identify primarily with one of those, but others of us—myself included—find ourselves bouncing back and forth between the 3. Wherever you find yourself and whichever of those 3 you most identify with, Paul’s premise in Romans is that none of us can ever be righteous before God based on what we do, and to make that point clearly to his Jewish audience, in Romans chapter 4 he turns to the example of Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Romans 4:1-3

Moses was viewed by many Jews as the father of the Israelite nation—kind of like our George Washington. It was Moses who led the Israelites out of Egypt and Pharaoh’s grasp after 400 years of slavery. It was Moses who led the Israelites across the Red Sea and into the desert where they were fed by heaven sent manna and quail and their thirst was quenched with water from a rock. It was Moses to whom God gave the Law including the 10 Commandments. And it was Moses who led the people to the edge of the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering.

But rather than highlighting Moses as the Father of Faith, Paul lifts up the example of Abraham. Abraham who left his extended family to go to a far-away place God would show him. Abraham, who, though he was 75 years old and had no children, was told by God that he’d be the Father of many nations. Abraham, who after 25 years when his wife was 90 and he was 100, gave birth to a son named Isaac.

Abraham’s perseverance was nothing short of amazing, but he had his flaws. Due to a high level of fear and anxiety about his own safety, he twice lied to foreign kings telling them Sarah, his wife, was actually his sister. He did this because his wife was beautiful and he feared he would be killed so that his wife could be taken for the kings’ pleasure. By doing this he put Sarah in grave danger two times.

After waiting 10 years for God to fulfill his promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son—Abraham was now 85 and Sarah a young pup at 75—Abraham and Sarah decided to take matters into their own hands and give God some help. Abraham took Sarah’s servant girl Hagar

and conceived a child through her. The boy's name was Ishmael. God promised to bless Ishmael, but told Abraham that he was still going to give them a son through Sarah.

Abraham was a man of faith and he persevered for 25 years as he waited for God's promise of a son to be fulfilled, but he was far from perfect. It was after Isaac was born and was probably a pre-teen or early teenager that God tested Abraham's faith in a dramatic way, and it was this encounter that led Paul and other Biblical writers to say, "*Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*"

I've asked someone our kids are very familiar with from Children's Ministry to tell us the story of Abraham's great test from Genesis chapter 22.

Telling of Abraham & Isaac's Story

There are elements of this story that are difficult for us to understand—God instructing Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and Abraham being willing to do it until God instructed him to stop. I can't explain that, other than to say Abraham was obedient because God told him to do it and at the last minute God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. But don't let our questions about what God instructed and what Abraham was ready to do, miss the point of this story—Abraham's faith and the belief he had in God.

Abraham and Sarah had waited 25 years for the son God had promised who would allow them to become the father and mother of nations. God had told childless Abraham that his descendants would be greater in number than the dust particles of the earth or the stars in the sky. Finally, God's promise was fulfilled, and Isaac was born. Then, some time later, God called out to Abraham and told him to offer him to God as a burnt sacrifice.

God's test for Abraham was to determine where Abraham's faith rested. Was his faith still in God, or was his faith now in Isaac, the child of promise through whom Abraham and Sarah would become the father and mother of nations? After God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac He said to him, "*Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.*" (Genesis 22:12) Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac demonstrated his supreme trust in God, his belief that God's promise would still be fulfilled

even if Isaac were no longer alive. The author of Hebrews in our New Testament has this to say about Abraham in Hebrews chapter 11 in his “Heroes and Heroines Hall of Fame” list.

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. Hebrews 11:17-19

The author of Hebrews points out that Abraham’s faith in God was so strong he believed God could raise Isaac from death even if he had been sacrificed.

Mataya already read the first 3 verses of Romans 4, so now I want to resume reading at verse 4...

Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.” Romans 4:4-8

Works for God and faith in God can’t be blended together. If we work for wages, we’re given them as an obligation, not as a gift. And if we place our trust in God, we receive his grace freely, it’s not something we’re owed. In the verses that follow, Paul speaks specifically to the Jewish rite of circumcision, which clearly marked Jewish men as followers of God.

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not. Romans 4:9-17

In these verses Paul claims that Abraham isn't just the Father of the Jews, he is the father of everyone who places their faith in God through Jesus. As I pointed out in previous weeks, this was a revolutionary truth. Up to that time Jews and Gentiles were viewed as separate. Jews were God's people and Gentiles were pagans. The law separated Jews and Gentiles. It gave favored status to God's people and diminished everyone else. Faith, in contrast, levels the playing field, allowing all people to come to God and receive his grace. Paul continues in verse 18 by writing more about Abraham's faith...

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Everyone—Jews and Gentiles alike—can be righteous before God, but righteousness comes, not by keeping the Law or following the words of Scripture, but by placing our faith in Jesus Christ and receiving the gift of his grace.

I want to conclude this morning by having us consider again our human propensity to earn God's favor. Listen again to the three results of our attempts to earn God's blessing and be righteous. Which of these do you most identify with?

- 1) Do you find yourself striving to be good and do good...then failing and feeling hopeless?
- 2) Do you find yourself working hard and striving to be good and do what's right, and then feeling prideful when you do pretty well? That leads to us comparing ourselves with others and looking down on those who aren't as successful at being good and doing right.

- 3) Would you say you most identify with trying to be good and do right, while you're very adept at managing appearances and hiding your mistakes. The picture you show to others isn't the real you, but rather a carefully maintained façade designed to have others think better of us than we really are. Over time we become increasingly convinced that the image we project is who we actually are.

I'm going to invite the worship team to play in the background as we reflect on what we've read in Romans chapter 4 today and on what I've shared. Identify which of the three responses you relate to and confess it to God as your pursuit of righteousness through works. Then acknowledge to Him your understanding that it's only by the grace of God as you place your faith in Jesus that you can be righteous before Him. As we read in Isaiah chapter 64, "*All our righteous acts are like filthy rags*" before God.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

Romans 5:1 & 2