

ROMANS SERIES #13

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on Sunday, February 18, 1996, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 4:1—16

HOW TO BE ACCEPTED BY GOD

The crucial question which is addressed in this passage is this — “How can I be accepted by God? How can I get to heaven? How can I be justified in God’s sight? How can I find myself acceptable so that God will make me part of His family?”

We know that some people try to get to heaven through being baptized, or through taking Communion, or through keeping the Commandments and being a moral person. Others engage in all kinds of religious rituals in order to make themselves acceptable to God. A friend of mine encountered two Hare Krishna young men in San Francisco. They were sitting chanting and eating popcorn. He asked them about the popcorn, and they said, “Oh, this is holy popcorn.” They said, “We chanted over it, and the spirit of Krishna went into the popcorn, and then, when we eat it, it cleanses us of all our sins. And that’s how we become acceptable to God!” So, eat popcorn, folks, and you’ll be acceptable to God!

We know, of course, that we cannot be saved by trying to earn salvation. Nor can we be saved by belonging to the right group. (“I’m a Catholic, I’m a Presbyterian, I’m a Baptist.”) No. Romans 3:28 summarizes Paul’s basic teaching on salvation, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the Law.” The only way we can be accepted by God is through faith in Christ. Now that’s the principle.

And Paul, being the master teacher, uses a very effective teaching tool in Chapter 4 to reinforce this principle. This tool is called “illustration.” Paul knew that we learn by illustration, and he gives us the example of Abraham to show us what he has just told us in Chapter 3. Illustrations are crucial to keep people interested. Sometimes as I preach I see people nodding! But the moment I begin to tell a story, I get everybody’s attention! Illustrations are like windows that let light in. So, Paul now says, “Let me give you an example, an illustration of justification by faith — how to be accepted by God.”

He selects his example with care, and he chooses Abraham, a man that all of us can relate to. Now, who was Abraham? He was the father of the Jewish nation, through Isaac, the son whom Sarah, his wife, bore him. Romans 4:1 says he was our “forefather,” the original Jew. But Abraham was also the father of the Arab nations through his son Ishmael, whom Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian maidservant, bore. So all the turmoil in the Middle East between Jews and Arabs is really just a family feud: It is between cousins. So Abraham is the father of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, and as such was a truly great man, the father of the faithful.

Abraham was born in the city of Ur, which is in the Mesopotamian Valley — Ur of the Chaldees in modern Iraq. In Ur, Abraham, being ignorant of the true God, was a moon worshipper. But one day God came to him and spoke to him and said, “Abraham, gather up all your family and move.” And Abraham said, “Where?” And God said, “I’ll tell you when you get there!” On faith Abraham set out with his family and his possessions on the 900-mile trek westward to the land God was going to give him: God promised that out of this one man He would make a great nation, the nation of Israel. Now Paul knew that the Jews held Abraham in the deepest reverence, so he thought, “This man is a perfect example to prove that you’re not saved by works but only by faith.” Now there are two key words:

1. The word “justified.” It literally means “to be completely accepted by God” — “to enter into a right relationship with God.” God becomes my friend, and not my enemy. In James 2:23 it says, “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness and he was called ‘the friend of God.’” Wouldn’t you like to be God’s friend? That’s what we’re going to speak about this morning. How can I become friends with God? I’ve often told you that “justified” means “Just-as-if-I’d” never sinned! God sees us perfect and complete in Christ. Now this is an important word because it gives us a sense of worth. All of us need to have self-esteem, and the fact is that when you really feel accepted by God, then you’re going to feel self-acceptance.

2. The word “credited.” The word in the K.J.V. is the word “reckoned.” “Abraham’s faith was reckoned to him for righteousness.” It’s an accounting, a bookkeeping term. It means to “compute”. (You computer buffs will appreciate this.) It means to “calculate.” It is used 41 times in the New Testament; 39 times by Paul; 19 times in Romans; and 11 times in this 4th chapter. So this can be called “the computer chapter of the Bible!” And it goes like this: God calculates our sin, and He calculates what Jesus did for us on the Cross, and He “reckons” that the one cancels out the other! In the debit column, He sees our sins; in the credit column there is God’s imputed righteousness through Christ’s atoning sacrifice; and the books balance! We will see the importance of these two words, “justified” and “credited” in the life of Abraham.

How can I be accepted by God? Abraham shows us how. Paul clears up any misunderstanding about how we’re saved. And,

1. The first thing Paul says here is that we don’t become acceptable to God by doing good works. Look at verse 1: “What then shall we say that Abraham our forefather discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about — but not before God.” He says, “Just suppose you could be saved by doing good, then you could brag about it.” Can you imagine what heaven would look like if you could earn your way there? Everybody would be strutting around — “How did you get here?” “What are you doing here?!” “Well, I gave to the United Way.” You can always tell when someone is trying to work his way to heaven: He tells you about it! “Well, you know, I went down to Mexico recently, at my own expense, to help the crippled children.” “Oh, really!” And they want you to ask more!

They may brag to others: “But not before God.” He’s saying, “You may brag about what you’ve done before people, and they may applaud you, but God’s standard is so much higher that

you could never measure up to it, and so your good works don't impress God at all. God never says, looking at you or me, "How did I ever create such a magnificent product?"

Now verse 3, "What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." Now what made Abraham acceptable to God? It was his faith. Back in Genesis 15 we have the actual account of how God dealt with Abraham. Genesis 15:1 says, "After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision and God said to him, 'I'm going to make you a great nation.'" Now remember Abraham was 85 years old, and he still had no children by his wife, Sarah, who was by now 76. And God said, "Your descendants will be a great nation." In verse 5 God takes Abraham outside and says, "Abram, look up at the heavens and count the stars, if indeed you can count them — so shall your offspring be." Abraham at 85 believed God, and God credited it to him as righteousness." This is the first time the word "believe" is used in the Bible, and one of the principles of Bible study is — where a word is first used in Scripture it sets the pattern for how it is to be used throughout the Bible. The word in Hebrew literally means "to say Amen"! "Amen" means "So be it. I agree with you, God." God gave Abraham a promise and Abraham said, "Amen, Lord! I agree with You, Lord!" He believed God. Just as he had trusted God to lead him from Ur to the Promised Land, so now he trusts God implicitly to make him the father of a nation. It was his faith in God that caused God to credit him with righteousness. He didn't earn this blessing God was about to bestow on him — God just chose him. He said, "Abraham, you and Sarah will have a son!"

Tell me, how would you respond if you were 85 and childless, and God said, "You're going to be a father." We know how Sarah responded: She laughed! We know she didn't believe God because if she had, she wouldn't have laughed; she would have cried! So they had a baby, and God said, "This is kind of funny, so let's call the boy Isaac" because in Hebrew "Isaac" means "laughter"; so every time they looked at Isaac they laughed and said, "There's that joke the Lord played on us!" So Abraham was justified by faith, not by works.

Now go back to Romans. In verse 4 Paul adds another illustration. He says, "When a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work, but trusts God Who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." Now get the picture. when you work eight hours a day five days a week, and at the end of the week or fortnight, your boss gives you your paycheck, do you say, "Oh, thank you very much. You're so generous. This is a wonderful gift!" It's no gift! You say, "Let me have my check: I earned it." This is income tax time, and you say, "I wonder if I could convince the IRS that all my paychecks were gifts." I think if you listed them as gifts you would have a 100% chance of being audited. Paul says, "How could salvation be a gift if you worked for it and earned it?" Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of sin is death..." You see, we get our condemnation the old-fashioned way — we earn it! But "the gift of God is eternal life through Christ our Lord." Wages are something you deserve: A gift is totally undeserved. The bottom line, therefore, is this: If you are a Christian, there is nothing you can do that will make God love you any more than He loves you now, and there's nothing you can do to make Him love you any less.

Some people say, "Well, if that's the case, why don't I just go out and live any way I want to?" I say, "Just try it!" God will still love you, but that doesn't mean He won't discipline you. God will discipline us just because, like any wise and good parent, He loves us.

Paul now proceeds to give another example of justification by faith in the life of King David. You see, Paul is telling us about the heavyweights. Abraham is like George Washington, the father of his nation. And if Abraham is Washington, David is the Lincoln. The apostle couldn't appeal to any people more imposing than Abraham and David. Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation; and David, from whose loins the Messiah, the Son of David, should come — the Lord Jesus Christ. Now look at verse 6, "David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered." "Blessed" means "happy." "Happy is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him." Now this is a quote from Psalm 32:1-2. Psalm 32 is one of the psalms of confession. It is one of the seven penitential psalms, and was written after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then, in trying to cover his adultery, he had Bathsheba's husband, Uriah murdered.

Do you realize what ghastly sins those were? Let me give you a modern illustration. Nearly 40 years ago, a Scotsman killed his own mother and was given life imprisonment. While in prison he was converted and actually felt a call to the Gospel ministry. He was released after 25 years and was accepted as a student at one of the seminaries of the Church of Scotland. But when he graduated there was a terrible hubbub throughout the Church of Scotland. Who would ever want a mother killer as their minister?! Now the point is — that man's sin was no worse, if it was even as bad, as David's sin.

And yet David could say, "I got myself into one horrible mess as a result of my sin, but God cleared my record, because I repented and trusted in His mercy, and He forgave even me!" He knew he didn't deserve to be forgiven, but he rejoiced in the fact that God honored his faith. If you are a believer, God keeps a record of your works so you will be rewarded. But He does not keep a record of your sins, because they have all been covered by the blood of Jesus. God had said through Jeremiah the prophet, "I will forgive their wickedness, and will remember their sins no more." (31:34) Every sin you will ever commit has already been paid for. You say, "What, then, is the purpose of confessing my sins that I commit as a Christian?" When a Christian sins, he forfeits fellowship with his heavenly Father. He's still a child of God, but he's out of fellowship. And confession restores fellowship.

So, using Abraham and David, Paul says, "You became acceptable to God by faith, not by doing good works."

2. The second thing he says is, "We don't become acceptable to God by performing religious rituals." Paul now talks about circumcision which was, of course, the most important ritual and symbol of the Jewish nation. If you were not circumcised, you were not considered to be a Jew, and that is true to this day. They thought this ritual was an automatic passport to heaven. But Paul says that is an error for two reasons:

i. Look at verses 9 and 10, "Is this blessedness (being accepted by God) 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." You see what Paul is saying? Go back again

to Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Remember, Abraham was not a Jew at this point. He did not become a Jew until he was circumcised. When did that happen? We are told in Genesis 17:23. Now in Genesis 15 Abraham was 85 (see Gen. 15:15). In chapter 17 Abraham is 99 — 14 years later! When did God say to Abraham, “Abraham, you are OK!”? — When he was 85 — 14 years before this whole ritual of circumcision was even developed. So, Paul is blowing the minds of the Jews who thought that the only way to get to heaven was by being circumcised. He’s saying to these Jews, “Hey, fellows, read your Bible!” Abraham was credited with righteousness 14 years before he was circumcised and became a Jew!

ii. Verse 11 gives the second reason why circumcision is no passport to heaven. “And he received the sign of circumcision, 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.” Paul is saying, “Circumcision is only a symbol of your faith; it is not the cause of your salvation.” When you buy meat at the supermarket, it bears the USDA Seal on the package. Does that seal make that meat acceptable, or does it show that the meat is acceptable? And that’s what all rituals do. The modern counterpart of circumcision is, of course, baptism. Baptism doesn’t make you a believer: It shows that you are a believer. Baptism is like the wedding ring of the Christian life. A ring doesn’t make you married; it shows that you are married. What makes you married is the commitment you made on your wedding day, a commitment which you continue to honor. The ring is the outward sign of the inward commitment. So, Paul says that rituals are fine, but they are nothing more than signs, symbols, and seals that say, “This is approved” — like the “Good Housekeeping” seal of approval. So Abraham became a believer before he became a Jew. Therefore, he is the father of everyone who believes whether he’s gone through the rituals of circumcision or baptism or the Lord’s Supper or not. So we’re not acceptable to God because of our good works or our religious rituals.

3. We don’t become acceptable to God by keeping the Law. Paul has already talked about this, but he uses Abraham again as an example in vs. 13, “It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by going to church(?)...” Is that what it says? No! Does it say, “through the righteousness that comes through being sincere”? No. It is “the righteousness that comes by faith.” Again I say, “Keeping the Commandments will never get you to heaven.”

Why does Paul use Abraham as an example of someone who was saved without keeping the Law? Because Abraham lived 430 years before the Commandments were given at Mt. Sinai; so how in the world could Abraham be saved by keeping the Jewish Law when God had not yet enunciated the Law? Abraham had it made before the Law was even given!

Verse 14 gives us the purpose of the Law: “For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value, and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.” Paul is saying this — if there’s no law to break, then you don’t have any lawbreakers. If you’re in the middle of Nevada where there’s no speed limit, you can put the pedal to the metal and you’re breaking no law.

Now there's something about human nature that makes people want to break a law the moment it is established. "Stolen fruits are sweetest." God told Adam and Eve, "You can eat anything in the entire garden except the fruit from one little tree." Guess which tree they set their heart on! The only way we keep from breaking the law is to have no law. The purpose of the Law was never to save anybody; it was just to show us that we needed to be saved.

Now, if we can't be acceptable to God through doing good works or through rituals or through keeping God's laws, then:

4. There's only one way we can be acceptable to God, and that is by faith. This is the cardinal message of the whole letter to the Romans.

But someone is going to say, "What about James chapter two?" So let us look at that passage because it looks like a flat out contradiction of what Paul says in Romans 4. In James 2:21-24 James talks about Abraham also, and quotes the same verse, "Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son, Isaac, on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness' and he was called 'God's friend.'" Then verse 24, "You see that a person is justified by what he does, and not by faith alone." Does that sound like a contradiction, folks?!

Now let me explain that it is not a contradiction at all, once you understand it. Notice carefully, James and Paul are talking about two different things. Paul is talking about the root of salvation; James is talking about the fruit of salvation. In Romans, Paul says that Abraham believed God when God promised to make him the father of a great nation. What could Abraham do about that? Absolutely nothing. It was an unconditional promise; and what do you do with such a promise? You simply accept it. You couldn't earn it.

Now James talks about an event that happened years later when God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on the altar. Remember, Abraham had walked with the Lord for many years when his faith was put to this awful test. And James says, "There is an example of genuine faith!" It's not that faith is the opposite of works; it's not that you have to have faith and perform works in order to be saved; it's that faith is faith, and we demonstrate faith by works. It is your faith that saves you, but how do you know if you have saving faith? It is by being obedient and doing that God tells you to do.

When Blondin, the tight roper walker, carried his assistant on his back across Niagara Falls on the rope, he said to the bystanders, "Do you believe I could carry you across?" They all said, "Yes." But when he asked for a volunteer, there were no takers! Now that's what James is talking about. "Put your money where your mouth is," he says. "You say you've got faith. Then prove it by your works, as Abraham proved his faith by his unhesitating obedience to God when God said, 'Abraham, offer up Isaac.'" It's not faith plus works; it's that works demonstrate your faith. So there's no contradiction between James and Paul.

And why are we accepted by God only on the basis of our faith? Because God wants

to demonstrate His marvelous grace toward us!

Look at verse 16, “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 are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.” You see, “those who are of the law” are the Jews; “those who are of the faith of Abraham” are us! It’s by faith so that it may be by grace. The word “promise,” as I have said, is the Greek word which means an unconditional promise. God says, “I’m going to save you by grace, that is, out of the goodness of my heart.” Our salvation is not based on our performance. It is not based on a conditional promise — “If you keep working, I’ll keep saving you.” NO! And this promise is “guaranteed.” If our acceptance were based on our performance, how could we ever be certain that we were going to reach heaven finally? How could we have any guarantee or any assurance? You would always be wondering, “Have I done enough?” But since our acceptance is based on the fact that God is gracious toward us, it is, therefore, guaranteed. God has given His word.

Aren’t you glad that God acts toward us in grace? Otherwise you could never be sure of your acceptance by God. The guarantee is based on God’s character, not on our performance, and that’s good news!

AMEN.