**Romans 4:1-5** March 12, 2017

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*1What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? 2If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. 3What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” 4Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. 5However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Abraham: Works or Faith?**

If you are going somewhere unfamiliar and you take a wrong turn. How long does it take you to realize your mistake? If you have a GPS, probably not long. But let’s say you don’t have one. How long will it be before you start thinking, “This doesn’t look right!”

Back about 1990 I was working at McDonald’s in Menomonie, Wisconsin. One night, just before closing time, a man came in asking about a certain place in Menomonie. None of us could help him; none of us had heard of the place he was looking for. After a while, we figured out he was supposed to be in Menomonee, Michigan, not Menomonie, Wisconsin. The two Menomonees are farther apart than we are from West Virginia. When you make that kind of wrong turn, realizing your mistake is despair.

**I. The Wrong Path: Abraham and Works**

One man who didn’t make many wrong turns was Abraham. I am talking about the man from our Old Testament reading. He did an amazing thing. At the age of 75 God told him to leave everything he had known in life. He was to leave his country, his family (other than his wife who went with him), everything. He was supposed to pack it all up. *Your* first question would have been, “Where, God? Where are we going?” But God just said, “Hit the road. As you walk for days and weeks on end, *go to the land I will show you.*” And he did it. Remarkable man!

Abraham did a lot of impressive things. When he got to the new land, about the first thing he did was build an altar to the Lord God. There weren’t any pastors or elders who were going to come knocking, “Yes, Mr. Abraham? We haven’t seen you in church a while…” No, Abraham just built an altar and decided that whether or not there were pastors and church elders taking attendance, he was still going to worship God. Remarkable man!

There was one man who went with Abraham, a nephew named Lot. Over the years Lot and Abraham became so wealthy that their livestock interests could not stay close to each other. The two relatives in a strange land had to part. As the family patriarch, Abraham had the right to first pick of where he would go. But he gave that right to his nephew. Lot took all the best land for himself. But Abraham didn’t mind. Remarkable man!

Then Abraham, at risk of life and limb, turned around and rescued Lot from raiding parties. A while later, he saved his nephew from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Remarkable man!

When Abraham finally had a son in his very old age, and that son had grown to be a teen-ager, God told Abraham to do something that sounded terrible – to sacrifice his son on an altar like a sacrificial lamb. That was what God said. And, whatever you might think about it, Abraham was willing actually willing to do it, though he didn’t have to go through with it. He did what Jesus tells us, *“Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”* Remarkable man! Shouldn’t we be a little more like Abraham?

Did you notice? We took a wrong turn. About 3 or 4 minutes ago we took a wrong turn and you didn’t even notice, did you? I have spent a few minutes praising the great things that Abraham did. They were amazing things. What obedience! What discipline!

**II. The Right Path: Abraham and Faith**

But this is what our Scripture reading says, ***“What shall we say that Abraham discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works…”*** And here I need to explain that word ***“justify.”*** When you hear that word “justify,” the picture that should come to mind is a judge in a courtroom. And he strikes his gavel and says, “I declare the defendant ‘Not guilty.’” “To justify” is to declare that the defendant is in a right standing with the law. Or to use a less precise but more memorable hook: “Justify means, ‘Just as if I’d never sinned.’” When God justifies us, he declares us to have no guilt before the law of God.

Abraham was and is in heaven. Jesus himself said it in two places (Lk 16:23; Jn 8:56). But the question is: How did Abraham get there? Many would point out all of Abraham’s acts of obedience: how he left his land just because God told him to, how he continually did right and more than right for his nephew, how he loved God even more than son or daughter. But God’s word tells us that if we want to get to heaven, that is a wrong turn! Then what is the right way?

Now, back to the passage: ***“If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”***

There is only one place that talks about Abraham being righteous, being justified. Romans 4:3 quotes that passage. ***“What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”***

Romans goes, not into some hidden Bible passage in the prophet Obadiah or Zechariah, but to a story from Abraham’s life that every eight-year-old child who has gone to Sunday School knows – and thanks to you Sunday School teachers who bring this to our children. And if it’s been a few years since you were 8, and maybe forgot the story, take a look at the front of your bulletin, and you will remember. It is the time when Abraham was starting to doubt God’s promises. He had been living like a nomad for a decade or so. His 75 years had become 85, and God still hadn’t fulfilled his promises, and Abraham was worried. He was worried that he had foolishly followed God down a rabbit hole, that he was somewhere he didn’t want to be. Then God came and repeated his promise to anxious, aging Abraham, *“Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be.”* And that is when it says, *“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”* He believed. His fears evaporated. None of the amazing deeds that Abraham did ever got him called righteous. None of them. But when he just stood there, or maybe kneeled to the ground, in the darkness of night before electric lights and he looked at the stars with wonder and he did nothing but believe God’s unearned promises, ***“[God] credited it to him as righteousness.”*** Faith, not works, justifies.

To illustrate how undeserved this is, verses 4 and 5 use a picture that you understand well: a worker and his wages. Let’s say that one pay day the boss comes to you. He pats you on the shoulder and says, “I would like to give you a generous gift.” He hands you an envelope. Excited, you rip it open. Inside you find your pay check. You look closely. It is what you always get paid. No raise. No bonus. At first you are puzzled, but on the way home you get more upset the more you think about it. “This isn’t a gift. I worked for that! I had it coming! And he acts like he is being all generous!”

***“Now 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.”*** Getting saved is *not* like working for a paycheck. Even Abraham could not earn salvation. He simply trusted God’s promises. When we simply believe God’s promises, God ***“credits”*** that to us as righteousness. He justifies us.

**III. The Path of Faith Gives Us Humble Certainty**

The number one reason to remind yourself that salvation comes only through faith is because if we are traveling the road of works, we are traveling the wide and broad road to destruction, to hell. In Christ Jesus, God has graciously given us forgiveness and adoption as children. God has also said that all who don’t want that free and gracious gift of Christ Jesus, but who instead say, “No, let me do it my way,” they reject God’s free gift of grace. They will be judged. Don’t trust your works, and don’t let others do it either! Don’t let your neighbor complacently think that they are doing enough for God. Because they are not, and that is a fatal mistake. Present God’s promises to them as just that: God’s promises. Watch Abraham simply believe God’s promises.

The second reason to remind ourselves of salvation by grace through faith is our own peace of mind.

Remember the Biblical meaning of justification? Justified means, “Declared not guilty,” or “Just as if I’d never sinned.” Many say that when God justifies us, he doesn’t declare us not guilty and saved. They would say that God puts something inside of you. They say that God begins to make you good, but you must finish it. But Romans 4 talks only about faith. No works, not even cooperation. As soon as we start adding even a sprinkle of our good works to it, we have taken a wrong turn down the works path. And we are in danger of throwing Christ’s works out the window.

Others will say that fulfilling all of God’s laws is obviously too hard for us, so God has lowered the bar. The one law is that we manufacture faith inside our hearts. That is why many have their altar calls, their prayers to invite Jesus into their heart (a prayer which is never found in the Bible). And it always leaves you with the question, “Have I believed hard enough? Is my faith strong enough?” You see what has happened? They take the attention off the Savior and put it on their faith. Like a beggar who has been handed a gold coin looking at his hand instead of the gold coin. It leaves you feeling that your act of believing is what saves you. And so, except in moments of spiritual arrogance, it leaves you doubting that you are certain of God’s grace, because not even our faith will be perfect in this life. But verse three says, ***“What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”*** Credited to him. Not worthy. But God still credited it to him as righteousness.

Just believe. Just take God’s promise of forgiveness in Jesus Christ at face-value with child-like faith.

You know what child-like faith is, right? There is an age when kids have a nearly perfect faith in their parents, maybe somewhere between three and five years. Kids at that age don’t worry, they just don’t, because Mom and Dad will take care of everything. Dad is the strongest man in the world, and Mom’s kisses have this magical ability to chase away disease and cleanse wound and soothe pain. But there is one time that children of that age worry – when Mom and Dad worry. The moment Mom cries or Dad shows nervous anxiety, they bust out crying – even though they have no idea why! But if a planet-sized meteor is headed at earth and the parents are calm, the kids are sure it is nothing to worry about. Here is the great thing about Christian child-like faith. God actually is all-knowing and all-powerful, and he never gets worried.

How are we made right with God? How are we justified? When we do nothing except trust his promises given in Jesus, our Savior from our sin. Lord, give us such a child-like faith. Amen.