

Not Really a New Idea

Romans 4:1-12

March 13, 2011

Over the last two weeks we have been looking at Paul's argument that the Jews and Gentiles, indeed everybody who is going to be saved, are saved in the same way—by faith. This is the core of the gospel. It is the heart of the message of the church. It is the reason nobody has any reason to boast. The truth is that none of us deserve salvation, and yet God, in His grace, saves some by giving them His own righteousness through the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Paul has made this point as clearly as he can, and now he wants to expand on it and show that it has always been this way. In order to do that he has to go back through the history of God's people and look closely at how God has dealt with them. He starts at the beginning of the Jewish understanding about themselves. The Jewish identity was wrapped up in being children of Abraham. Since Abraham had a special relationship with God, they figured they did too. This carried over to an understanding that they were better than the people around them because God had chosen them and given them His law. Having and obeying the law, in popular Jewish thinking, had become the end all and be all of being God's people. Now that Paul has demonstrated that the gospel shows that to be false, he needs to demonstrate it was never true to begin with.

So, Paul asks, "What about Abraham?" More specifically, "*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. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" (vv.1-3) If the Jews of Paul's day could only be saved by faith, then it must have been true of Abraham as well. It was understood that Abraham was a friend of God's and that it was through Abraham that God instituted the covenant. Yet it was also believed that it was Abraham's obedience to the covenant's requirements that saved him and paved the way for the existence of the Jewish people.

Paul looks more closely at the Old Testament account and points out that Abraham was saved by **faith**, just like everybody who has ever been saved. God was pleased by Abraham's obedience, but it was only through faith that God credited any righteousness to him. What do the scriptures say? That Abraham's belief in God's promises to him was credited to him as righteousness. It was not his behavior, but his trust in God.

This must be true because none of us are good enough to be saved. I've said before that it is a good thing God is not fair. He is merciful in not giving us what we deserve. What then shall we say that Abraham discovered in this matter? 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."

So, what of works? Paul answers that for us. "*Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.*" (v.4) This seems obvious enough. If you do a job you deserve to get paid.

Wages are the things you earn. If you do the job with the understanding that a certain amount will be paid to you for your services, then the person who paid those wages to you can't turn around and say they gave you a gift. They may have given you a favor in providing the job in the first place, but once you have done work with the understanding that you will be paid for it, the money that is paid is not a gift, it is the obligation of the one who hired you. Paul comes back to this idea in a few chapters. For now, he moves on to the other side of the coin.

Since salvation is by faith there is no sense in which it can be the result our work. Contrary to popular belief, nobody deserves to go to heaven. We cannot be made righteous by the things we **do**. Paul points out, “[T]o the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” (v.5) Note that God does not justify the good. That wouldn't make sense. If people really were good, then they would already be justified. God would not need to justify them. It is not the good that God justifies, but the wicked. Of course, we have already seen that we are all wicked. Back in chapter three re read as Paul said we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and then quoted verses from the Old Testament to prove his point. We are all sinners. We are all wicked. We all must trust the God who justifies the wicked, to erases their crimes from the record books. If we place our faith in Him, He will call us righteous.

Paul wants to point out that this is not a new idea that he came up with. It has warrant in the scriptures he shared with his readers. Abraham was credited with

righteousness through his faith. David, Israel's greatest king, recognized this about Abraham and God and he depended on it.

David was also a great poet and musician and he wrote many of the Psalms. Paul says he recognized that God credits righteousness to people regardless of, and in spite of, their works. David wrote, “*Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.*” (Psalm 32:1,2) David realized that, as important as the sacrifices and keeping the law were, they were useless if the heart was not right with God. God's mercy and forgiveness are much more important. The sacrificial system reminded the people that sin is a big thing. Even in light of God's mercy it is not to be taken lightly. Yet we must always remember that it is not our lack of sin that saves us. We don't lack it. It is God's grace that saves us as He takes the sacrifice to which all the others pointed—the only sacrifice that really mattered—and He applies the blood shed by His Son on the cross to our sin, washing us clean. This sacrifice applies to all who have faith.

It is to the question of the extent of the sacrifice that Paul next turned. “*Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?*” (v.9) The quote from David's Psalm could be taken to mean that God forgives and will not count the sins of people in the covenant who are obedient to God. After all, David did go on to add that the Lord forgives those who have no deceit in their spirit. Is it the case that the blessed by the Lord are those who are keeping the covenant? Is this

forgiveness and covering of sin by way of the sacrifices made at the Temple?

Paul denies it by looking again at the history of Abraham. We have already seen that God credited Abraham's faith as righteousness. The question now is when that happened. If God's forgiveness is only for those in the covenant, then Abraham would be forgiven by God and declared righteous once he was safely in the covenant and keeping its requirements. This would mean that God blesses those who have faith, and are in the covenant. On the other hand, if Abraham was declared righteous by God outside of the covenant, then people could be blessed by God without respect to the covenant God made with Abraham. It seems a quibbling over words, but it is very important and something with which the early church had to deal. The root question is, does God save people outside of the covenant He made with Abraham? More directly, do you have to be a Jew to be saved? Must people who come to Jesus become Jews before they can become Christians?

Paul looks carefully at the timing of the events in Genesis and declares of Abraham, "*Under what circumstances was [righteousness] credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!*" (v.10) God had made promises which Abraham believed, but God had not yet entered into a formal covenant with Abraham when God credited his faith to him as righteousness. God did not make a covenant with unrighteous Abraham and make him righteous through that covenant. God declared Abraham righteous through his faith and then formalized the promises Abraham had believed by making a covenant with him. It was **after**

Abraham was declared righteous by God that he and his household were circumcised and the covenant was established.

This means that the covenant and circumcision are not required to be declared righteous by God. If Abraham could be called righteous before he received the mark that included him in God's people, then anybody who is outside of God's people can be declared righteous. What matters is not whether you are part of "God's people," but whether you have **faith** in the promises of God—specifically the promise that all who stop trusting in themselves and trust in the blood Jesus shed on the cross for their salvation will be saved. It's not about the outward sign of the covenant—whether circumcision or baptism. It is about faith. "*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 also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.*" (vv.11,12)

The question stands before us this morning. On what do we base our relationships with God? Are we trying to prove ourselves worthy? Do we seek to hide our sins from Him? Are we convinced we are going to heaven because we give God our time, money, and some of our attention? Is it important to you that you have been going to church for decades, showing up week in and week out? Do you think that God owes you something for that service rendered to Him? Have you made a covenant with God and believe He owes you

heaven because you have lived up to your end of the deal?

I hope that you base your relationship with God on His promises. Trust that He will keep them. Have faith in Him and trust that He will keep you. You are not good enough to earn righteousness. Nobody is or ever has been. You can't do it, so you can stop trying to earn a place in God's presence. If you feel His call today, answer it by accepting the forgiveness He freely offers to all who believe.