

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17a

What then will we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered according to the flesh? ²If indeed Abraham had been justified by works, he would have had a reason to boast—but not before God. ³For what does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

⁴Now to a person who works, his pay is not counted as a gift but as something owed. ⁵But to the person who does not work but believes in the God who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited to him as righteousness.

¹³Indeed, the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not given to Abraham or his descendants through the law, but through the righteousness that is by faith. ¹⁴To be sure, if people are heirs by the law, faith is empty and the promise is nullified. ¹⁵For law brings wrath. (Where there is no law, there is no transgression.) ¹⁶For this reason, the promise is by faith, so that it may be according to grace and may be guaranteed to all of Abraham’s descendants—not only to the one who is a descendant by law, but also to the one who has the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.”

Faith Alone, Grace Alone

I.

When the Bible wants to talk about faith, some pretty big names are involved. The writer to the Hebrews talks about faith in the 11th chapter of his letter. He talks about Abel, from the account of Cain and Abel. Abel was really the first martyr—the first person to be put to death because of his faith. He speaks of Enoch, a person with so great a faith that he didn’t even die; instead, God took him directly to heaven. Noah is mentioned—the last believer on earth of his day. His family believed because of his strong faith; they were the only eight people saved when God covered the earth with the flood waters.

Then the writer to the Hebrews gets to Abraham. Abraham was a big deal. The writer begins a long dissertation about him this way: “By faith Abraham...” (Hebrews 11:8, NIV84).

The Jewish faithful could, and did, talk extensively about Abraham’s greatness. Abraham was the man who went to live in a far-off country, without knowing where it was he was going, as our Old Testament Lesson for today reminded us. You remember other towering examples of Abraham’s faith. He took his only son Isaac, the son of the promise, and headed off to sacrifice him, as God commanded. He knew and believed that God would keep the promise of the Messiah alive despite what the horrendous circumstances seemed to indicate.

Paul says: “What then will we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered according to the flesh? ²If indeed Abraham had been justified by works, he would have had a reason to boast” (Romans 4:1-2, EHV). By all outward signs, *this* must have been a righteous man. *This* was the kind of man who deserved God’s love—who surely deserved heaven.

I officiated at the funeral service of a similar giant of the faith named Marcella. She was a retired Christian Day School teacher.

She was the consummate called worker. She had dedicated her life to service in the church. An accomplished musician, Marcella wrote a complicated musical piece called the

Christmas Story, based on Luke 2. As difficult as it was to sing, all the children of the Christian Day School learned that song from little on and sang it every year as part of the children's Christmas service.

If there was ever a person you could eulogize at her funeral, Marcella was the one. Accomplishment after accomplishment could be listed. Good works could be piled up as far as the eye could see.

Paul says: "Now to a person who works, his pay is not counted as a gift but as something owed" (Romans 4:4, EHV). Look at Abraham. Look at Marcella. They did a lot of good works.

What about the rest of us? If you compared the lives of Marcella or Abraham to yours, what would you see? What would you think? Does God owe *you* anything? Have *you* lived the same kind of righteous life? Perhaps some might believe themselves to be that accomplished, but most of us would have to drop our chins in defeat. We're not even close.

II.

I don't remember, nor did I ever know, details about various sins that were certainly present in Marcella's life, but they were there. Of course, I didn't mention any sins during her funeral sermon, but I *did* say that Marcella's good works were meaningless in her quest for heaven. *That* was not what some of her friends wanted to hear; they were offended.

"What then will we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered according to the flesh? ²If indeed Abraham had been justified by works, he would have had a reason to boast—but not before God" (Romans 4:1-2, EHV). It might have *seemed* that Abraham could boast about his works, but not before God, Paul reports. His good works were meaningless in the quest for heaven, even for a man so renowned as Abraham. This was an offensive statement to the Jews. They revered Father Abraham.

But Abraham was a flawed human being, wasn't he? His flaws are recorded in Scripture so we can clearly see that even those who are held up as model believers have nothing to boast about before God. Abraham tried to pass his wife off as his sister—not once, but *twice*! As he grew older and still had no heir, despite God's promises concerning the Messiah coming from his line, Abraham grew desperate. First he thought his servant Eliezer would have to be the heir through whom God's promise would come to pass; then he fathered a child through his concubine, figuring *that* must be the way to accomplish what was humanly impossible with his aging wife. He even *laughed* when God promised that it would be a child born to Sarah who would be the bearer of the promise.

It might have been offensive to the Jews, but even their hero, the mighty Abraham, could not boast of his goodness before God. His good works, as wonderful as they might look to people in the Jewish community, or the Christian community all these years later, are just not going to cut it to get Abraham to heaven.

III.

Too often, Christians try to put the cart before the horse. What we concentrate on is the works—the life of the Christian. None of that is enough to get to heaven. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect," Jesus said (Matthew 5:48, NIV84). Not "try really, really hard." Not "do your best." Not "be pretty good." "Be *perfect*."

It's a daunting task. It's an *impossible* task. The most diligent, wonderful Christian has to confess that there is a constant, nagging feeling that it just hasn't been enough. And it hasn't.

"Now to a person who works, his pay is not counted as a gift but as something owed.

⁵But to the person who does not work but believes in the God who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:4-5, EHV). Not one person can claim that heaven is their due because of their own personal righteousness. Not one can claim that heaven is the wages that are owed. Even those held up in Scripture as the heroes of faith couldn’t claim to have been perfect. Even exemplary Christians of our own time cannot claim to be perfect.

Don’t put the cart before the horse. The writer to the Hebrews identifies the proper order: “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:8-10, NIV84). The things Abraham did were done *by faith*. Faith came first...*then* came the actions that flowed out of a faith-filled heart. It wasn’t that God promised blessings to Abraham *because* of his faith. God promised, and *then* Abraham responded in faith.

God has given us the same promises. Jesus, the Descendant promised to Abraham, came to redeem us, too. Paul writes to the Galatians: “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Galatians 4:4-5, NIV84). The Christ who was promised to Abraham gave himself as the payment for sins. Last week we learned that “One righteous verdict led to life-giving justification for all people” (Romans 5:18, EHV). It is through faith in Jesus that we are forgiven—that we have life-giving justification—that we are reconciled to God.

IV.

Paul writes: “For this reason, the promise is by faith, so that it may be according to grace and may be guaranteed to all of Abraham’s descendants—not only to the one who is a descendant by law, but also to the one who has the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations’” (Romans 4:16-17, EHV).

Right here are two of the tenets Martin Luther lived by: faith alone through grace alone. It is by God’s grace alone that he has given us faith alone in Jesus as our Savior. This is how we get to heaven. In his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed Luther speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit. “I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” Luther reflects Paul’s words to the Romans, and Jesus’ words when he tells us “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16, NIV84).

What a comfort this is as we live our Christian lives! By faith alone. Given to us by grace alone.

You don’t have to wonder, because it’s not on you—it’s not your actions. It’s not wages, but a gift—a precious inheritance.

Now that you have it, live with the faith of Abraham. Yes, you, too, will have glaring faults. You, too, will have questions, and even doubts at times. But your over-all life will be one of faith—trusting God and his promise to you, the promise that comes through faith alone, by grace alone. Amen.