

## Contrast 2) of Works and Faith

Romans 4:1-5,13-17 • 2020-03-08 • Lenten Epistle Series: Contrast



There is a movie (The Ultimate Gift, 2007) about a young man who has a very wealthy grandfather. When his grandfather dies, he finds out just what he was expecting: a large inheritance stands to fall into his lap. He will be wealthy beyond his dreams and inherit everything his grandfather left behind. He shows up to receive his inheritance, but there is a problem: the young man is very spoiled and rude. His arrogance and pride made him unworthy receiving anything in his grandfather's estimation. So, there is a catch: he must follow through on a series of tasks in order to qualify for the inheritance. He's told that if he messes up in even just one of these tasks that he will lose everything. The rest of the film is about that rude and selfish man from the city doing things like working a manual labor job in the country and discovering what real work is like. For him it hardly seems worth it. I imagine for most viewers the inheritance doesn't seem like an inheritance anymore, but it does seem like easy money. What about what our inheritance from God? What sort of responsibilities and requirements are set before us? God gives us the answer in the Scriptures and today we read from Romans chapter 4 and look at God's dealings with Abraham to see a strong contrast between works and faith.

It seems like there are many people who do a lot of good works. There are the doctors who go the extra mile to help suffering patients. There are benefactors who use their time and resources to help those less fortunate. There are the kind people who do so much to help others out of whatever means they have. What about all those people? Don't they deserve something good from God? This is the mindset that the Jews were holding onto in Paul's time. It's still the mindset that many adhere to today. Many reason that God rewards good people with the reward of eternal life. How easy it is to consider that there must be something we do to make us worthy inheritors of God's blessings. Or the opposite thought might occur to those who don't think they've done many good works. One can lie in fear at the brink of death wondering "What can I fall back on to plead my case before God? What will make him really be kind to me?"

One man who had a rich inheritance coming from God and who did a lot of good deeds was Abraham. We heard about Abraham earlier this morning. Talk about a great root to have for your family tree! We read in Genesis 12 how Abraham has a pretty secure inheritance in store for him! God promises to bless him and to make him prosper and to bless the whole world through him! It's no wonder that Jews have always prided themselves in being descended from this man. And Abraham had an impressive catalog of good deeds. If anyone was righteous and good, it was him. Abraham used his own means to rescue captive prisoners of war. Abraham obeyed God by leaving his homeland. Abraham was so obedient he was willing to give up his only son. He clearly loved God and others. In fact, the Jews have many writings outside of the sacred text of Scripture which sing the praises of Abraham. He is called "the most righteous man who ever lived." Even the sacred Scriptures refer to Abraham as friend of God. "We are decedents", many Jews claim, "of this good man." Many descended from Abraham claim they have had their senses sharpened to the point of prophecy because they came from Abraham. They reason that if any deserve to receive a rich inheritance from God it is Abraham and his descendants!

But if we think that Abraham was blessed because he did good, we are missing the main point of the story of Abraham. There is a problem focusing on our good works. Not even the seemingly most righteous among us can lay claim to boasting in their deeds and what God will reward them. Not even Abraham. That's what the apostle Paul points out to us today in Romans chapter 4. "*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.*"

Abraham could boast before other people about his good deeds. He was better than most people by all outward appearances. But it would do no good to boast about it before God. Not even for Abraham. The conclusion that must be made by everyone is that we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We are not just spoiled grandchildren who don't deserve an inheritance; we are by our very nature rebellious and enemies of our God. Paul writes about the wrath of God against all who do wrong. And haggling with God for a blessing overlooks this frightening reality: the good we try to do doesn't erase all the bad. No matter how much good we do we can't erase the wrongs. When it comes to what we should expect from God it is something to fear. That's because any good we can lay claim to is something done in sin, by a sinner. It is worthless in God's eyes. Were Abraham to stand before God and display all the works which the Scriptures gives him credit for – he certainly could brag, but not before God. Standing before God he would have to remain silent, humble, and without a single claim to being worthy of anything. So would we.

How do we know? What about all the good deeds Abraham did? Didn't that count for anything?! Scripture makes it very clear from the start that Abraham's blessings from God had nothing to do with Abraham's works. To look at Abraham's works as part of the reason he is so blessed by God is to put the cart before the horse. The promise and blessing came first. Faith came first. Even before Abraham did so many of his works to serve God and others, he already had something from God. "*What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'*" Abraham is never right with God because of works. He is credited righteous through faith in God's promises.

At this point someone might try arguing, "But Abraham did the one greatest good work, he believed, right? Isn't his faith a great work before God? Abraham was a good man. God rewarded him for his good act of faith." Doesn't it make us feel

good to think that because we believe God we are somehow then worthy of his love? Doesn't it make us feel better than unbelievers when we consider faith to be a good work that we choose to do? But before we even try boasting of that we can only look at what Scripture says regarding faith. (Eph 2:1-10) It is not a work. We can't believe. God calls us to faith. He gives his gospel and his Spirit to create faith in our dark hearts. Faith too is a gift of good, not a work.

Paul illustrates God's gift of righteousness and eternal life with the idea of a paycheck. If we rely on our work, we are expecting a payment. Everyone who puts in time at a job expects to be duly paid for their labor. We all operate on this basis. And so, what we work for is not credited to us as a gift. We don't work 40, 50, or 60-hour work weeks only to say, "Thanks for the gift," to our employers. We expect the payment as something we earned. It is given as an obligation, not a gift. That's the basis we operate on, but not God. It's not like God is some divine employer who asks us to do good and who then in turn hands us a paycheck for accomplishing some task. God is above and beyond that. God does not owe us anything nor is he required to pay us for any deeds. We dare not approach him with such a mindset "Lord, look at all the good I've done in my life. You owe me one, God."



Like Abraham, we are all blessed on another basis: God's promise for the wicked. Abraham heard God pronounce great blessing on him and the whole world of sinners. And he trusted the promise. *"However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."* Faith is always based on something. You can have faith that God exists. But Abraham had more than that, he trusted the Word of God and the promises of God. God freely credited the gift of righteousness to him who believed that promise.

We heard part of that promise earlier today *"All peoples will be blessed through you."* Abraham bore the promise of the Savior of the world. Though he had no son and was a 75-year-old man in a strange land—he believed the promise of God that the Savior of the world would come through his own body. He looked forward to that man to be born from what would be called the nation of "Israel" after Abraham's grandson, Jacob. God didn't give Abraham a son because of Abraham's faith. God didn't create a nation from Jacob's sons because they had faith. God didn't send Jesus born of the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because they did anything. He did it all in grace. He freely fulfilled his promise. He did it because he promised to do so. *For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless.*

This is why Paul says Abraham is considered the father of us all—Jews and non-Jews— he is the father of all who believe God's promise of eternal life in Christ. We discover with Abraham that it is by grace that we are now blessed. We have been born spoiled, rotten, sinful, and we must confess we are wicked. But we know that God justifies the wicked. He justifies us. He says, "You are not guilty, you are an heir of eternal life." And so with Abraham we receive the promise.

This declaration of not guilty is made possible by Jesus Christ. God justifies the wicked because Jesus took their place. Jesus went to suffering and the cross to take that wrath of God that we deserved. Jesus did all the work. There was one man who we really do need to be connected to: Jesus the Son of God. And this connection comes through faith.

Because it all depends on Jesus and the promise of God we never have to worry about our inheritance. God doesn't put loopholes for us to jump through. It is a promise. It is a gift. This means that our inheritance, eternal life, all the blessings we have and await from God are guaranteed to us. Because it doesn't depend on us, but God's grace. It doesn't depend on our worthiness, but on his promise. Therefore, it is certain, and it is secure. Isn't that a comfort for sinners? We never need doubt if we really will receive our rich inheritance. *"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring."* As sure as Jesus lives, risen from death, the promise stands.

And don't misunderstand. God's gift of righteousness and eternal life doesn't mean we toss all good works out the window. Abraham did after all, do many good works. Not to earn heaven, but as part of life of faith and thanksgiving. Every work he did was a fruit of faith worked by God. Every work was an act of thanks to the God who had in his grace so richly blessed Abraham. So it is with us, we uphold the law out of love for our God of grace.

This Lent we consider this awesome truth: we are justified by God. And this is something that God has promised to us and fulfilled by sending Jesus his Son to the world. Jesus did live a life that deserved the payback of eternal blessings. Jesus did live without sin as the perfect Son of God. And Jesus did suffer and die the wrath of God that all the world deserved. He has won the greatest inheritance for us all. And it is given freely to all who believe.

It's a strong contrast, isn't it? The righteousness of Christ is credited to unrighteous sinners through faith. This bright and glorious gift makes us shine against the darkness of sin and death with light and life. One type of righteousness is focused on self and boast in self. We call it work-righteousness. It will fail for every sinner. The other righteousness is focused on Jesus and the gracious promise of God for sinners. It cannot fail. The gift received by faith stands out brightly in contrast to the tainted deeds of sinners. We rightly confess and sing that we are spiritually dead on our own, that we deserve nothing from God. And we rightly confess along with Abraham the God of all grace, *"the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."*