

“THE GOSPEL: To Your Credit”

A sermon by

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Sunday, March 3, 2019

TEXTS: Romans 4:1-5, Galatians 3:8-14, and John 5:24

Romans 4:1-5

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

Galatians 3:8-14

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.’ For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.’ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’ But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, ‘Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’— in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

John 5:24

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life.

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It catches you unaware, a bolt out of the blue. You have gone to the mailbox to get the daily mail. Buried within the bills and advertising circulars is an envelope. It is addressed to you. It looks to be an invitation. Your curiosity is aroused. You tear the flap and open the envelope. Curiosity turns to shock.

It is a dinner invitation. “Please join me for a dinner in honor of my son.” The invitation is from a man you have not seen for years, and it is not his fault. You have avoided him. You borrowed money you cannot possibly pay. You owe him a huge debt. The debt has been outstanding for over twenty years.

You turn the invitation over. There is a personal note written on the back. “All debts are forgiven. Come break bread with me. My son has paid your debt . . . in full. He has made things right. There is nothing to fear. All I want is for us to be reconciled. We are at peace.”

It is an imperfect illustration. However, it gets the main points of effectual calling across. God calls us. God invites us into relationship with himself and makes the way possible for us to come into that relationship. We cannot repair that breach. We cannot pay that debt. We do not have the capacity or resources to heal that wound.

Jesus does.

God has a purpose in saving us. It is the same purpose for which we are originally created. It is the answer to the first question of the Westminster Catechism. The question? “What is the chief end of man?” Essentially, what is

our purpose? Why are we here? The answer? We are created to bring glory to God and to enjoy God forever. That is God's purpose in making us. Note that the answer is about God, not about us. It is not about our happiness, our fulfillment, our glory, or our desires. We exist for God's pleasure and purpose.

Sin prevents the experience and the exhibition of the glory of God in our lives. Sin is the obstacle, the barrier that stands between us and God. There is a debt we owe that we cannot pay and there is nothing we can do about it. We cannot make ourselves right with God. We cannot bring ourselves into right relationship with God, a relationship of intimacy like that between a father and son. We cannot make ourselves holy, more like God in what we think, say, and do.

That is why God does for us what we as humans cannot do for ourselves. We do not deserve such consideration, we cannot earn it, and we cannot recreate ourselves. We can't make the debt go away. We can't make things right.

So God does what we will not. God does what we cannot. God loves like we dare not, and in so doing makes of us "new creations" where the old is passed away and all things become new.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism states, *"They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them."*

Justification is the divine miracle by which God declares as righteous the sinner who trusts in Jesus Christ by faith. Justification is being made right with God. It is being in a right relationship with God because of what Jesus Christ has done. It is trusting in the truth of what God has said, having faith in what God has done.

Even in the Old Testament, justification was by faith. Paul cites Abraham as our example. *"What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'"*

It was reckoned to Abraham. It was credited to Abraham. How? By faith. God made a promise to Abraham. Abraham believed God, even to the point of willingly sacrificing his only son, Isaac. Someone has even cleverly stated that God "justifies" us by treating us "just as if we had never sinned." Now, here is the distinction. The sinner is not made righteous. That would be a lie. However, God declares the sinner righteous based on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus bears the penalty of human unrighteousness and sin. The believer receives the benefit of the Savior's perfect righteousness.

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 3:23-25, *"For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified [made right with God] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus."*

Today we come to the Table of the Lord. This is the table of grace. We come empty to be filled. We come, not because we deserve to be here, not because we are worthy to receive, but because by this very invitation, God has declared all believers worthy to receive. We come, not because we have something to bring, but because we need what we cannot provide for ourselves.

Jesus Himself declared, *"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life."* (John 5:24)

Salvation and the justification that underlies it is all about God. We bring nothing to the table. We possess nothing we can bring into the table. If we exist for God's glory, then we have to remember that God says, *"I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols."* (Isaiah 42:8)

Justification is an act of God's free grace. It is God's action, not ours. It is free, because God is not compelled for any reason. God freely chooses to act in this way. It is grace because it is not deserved or earned.

It is an act of God's free grace wherein God pardons all our sins. That is the amazing thing. It is what is so amazing about grace. God pardons all our sins . . . the sins we have committed, the sins we have contemplated committing, and the sins we have yet to commit. All is all!

God then declares us righteous.

That doesn't mean that we are righteous. Justification is a *forensic* term, as in a term or concept used in a court of law. A defendant may be totally guilty of the crimes of which he or she is accused, but if the judge declares them "not guilty" they are, in fact, justified in terms of the law's requirements.

Justification means that God accepts us as righteous or declares us to be righteous because of what Jesus has done on our behalf, or only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. The righteousness we receive is “imputed” righteousness. It is righteousness that is “*extra nos*”, a righteousness that is from outside us, from beyond us, alien to us. It is imputed grace because it is the righteousness of Christ credited to our account. It is not our own righteousness, but His righteousness that becomes ours by faith.

It is also received by faith in Christ alone.

All of us enjoy receiving invitations—to a meal, a wedding, or a concert. Usually, when the invitation is printed on a little card, there are cryptic letters written at the bottom: RSVP. We know what those letters mean. They are an abbreviation of a French request to reply to the invitation. Unfortunately, not everyone knows that.

A couple found political asylum in this country during the Second World War. They came from Eastern or Central Europe, and they were not well versed in American culture. One day they received an invitation to a wedding, and at the bottom of the invitation were those cryptic letters: RSVP. In his thick, Eastern European accent, the husband said, "Vife, vat does it mean: RSVP? " So they thought for a while, until inspiration dawned, and the husband said, "Vife, I know vat it means: Remember Send Vedding Presents."

They made a mistake by imagining that the message was a demand. It was not a demand. It was an invitation.¹

The Table of Grace is set. Don't be upset if you didn't bring anything. There is nothing you could add, nothing you could bring, nothing you could do to deserve the grace offered. There is also nothing you have done to cause God to renege on God's invitation to you to come and receive what Christ has provided. All you need do is place your trust in what Jesus has already done for you and believe that His righteousness is enough.

Remember, this is not a potluck. This is a banquet. Jesus is the host. Everything is provided and the invitation is extended to all who will receive it in faith.

"O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him." (Psalm 34:8)

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. Amen.

¹ (<https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2008/february/greatestinvitationevermade.html>)