



November 4-5, 2017
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Who Gets the Credit?

Romans 3:27 – 4:12

Last Tuesday our staff had a harvest party, the high point of which was a pumpkin-carving competition! I liked all of the entries...except for one. One group was decidedly disrespectful to their Senior Pastor. I particularly did not appreciate the devil horns on my head. Very naughty...and very dangerous for job security! But maybe it illustrates what Paul is trying to teach as we continue our journey through Romans. Whatever we pretend to be or wish to appear to be on the outside, there is a devilish side to us all...a sin nature that we cannot cover up and that only God can repair.

Last week we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the launch of the Reformation when Martin Luther posted his 95 topics for discussion on the Wittenberg Church door. As the Reformation gained momentum, the primary non-negotiable issues were boiled down to five, what the Reformers began to refer to as the "Five Solas."

Sola is a Latin word that means "only." Here they are: *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, *Sola Christus*, *Sola Deo Gloria*. Can you translate them? *Only Scripture*, *only grace*, *only faith*, *only Christ*, *only for God's glory*. Those are the *Five Solas* of the Reformation. (And by the way, every denomination that has begun to slip away from orthodoxy...such as our former denomination...has done so because they lost their grip on one or more of these essential truths.)

And the heart of the Solas we find captured in the majestic passage we read last week from Romans 3: "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith....For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." Romans 3: 23-25; 28

"Justified by faith." Let me remind you of the definition of "justified," a word that appears more than 50 times in Romans! It is a word from the courtroom and it is the opposite of "condemned." We picture a prisoner standing before the judge... guilty as sin...caught on video breaking the law.... waiting for the verdict of "Guilty." Instead, he hears the incredible words, "Not guilty! Justified!"

But how is that possible? Paul spent two chapters driving home the point that every single human being *is* guilty of breaking God's law. We are *not* innocent...so how can a holy judge acquit us? *Because* of propitiation...that fancy word that means the sin-sacrifice of Jesus on

the cross. Because of God's incredible, undeserved grace...he offers his own son as the propitiation for our sin. Which means that when we stand before our God he sees not *our* sin but the righteousness of his sinless Son who covers us.

If we don't understand this proposition...justification by faith...we miss the entire gospel. That's why Paul pounds away at these themes again and again, because his readers...especially his Jewish readers...had a hard time digesting the fact that God's salvation was a free gift of grace available to all and had *nothing* whatsoever to do with the rule-keeping, meritorious behavior of the recipient.

Now comes a very gutsy move by Paul. He offers a *killer* illustration to which the Jews would immediately relate....because this is *the most important* man in Jewish history. The Father of the Jewish nation. Who? Abraham. Remember, way back in Genesis 12, God approached a pagan named Abraham and said, "Hi there. I'm God. And I want to make a covenant with you. I will be your God and you will be my man. Even though you and your wife are old and barren, I will make of you a great nation. And through your people, I will bless the entire world. Now, leave everything you know, take your family and go to the place that I will show you."

And Abraham said, "All right...I'll go!" God even had a special sign...a seal of that covenant. What was it? Circumcision. I'll be honest...I can think of other ways I'd rather seal a deal. A fist bump. A high-five. But it was circumcision that marked the fact that Abraham was God's specially chosen, specially loved ambassador to the world.

Abraham *was* Judaism. He was the *epitome* of Judaism. So...guess who Paul uses to illustrate his radical re-definition of salvation? Abraham. If chapter three was Paul's thesis statement about justification by faith *apart from works*, chapter 4 is his case study.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather 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 counted to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness... Rom 4: 1-5

Three times you hear the word "counted" in this passage. Actually, Paul uses it a total of 8 times in the chapter. "Counted" can also be translated "credited" ...and Paul illustrates what he means with an image from business. If you have a job and you work your appointed hours and fulfill your appointed tasks, you receive...wages! For many of us...myself included...those wages are credited right to your account. If I go online, I will see that my wages...which I earned because I worked for them...have been deposited to my account...on the credit side of the ledger.

But sometimes there's a surprise. When I was working as a youth minister in Bakersfield, I was poor. I was having a hard time paying my bills, and I went into the bank to have the teller give

me my account balance. (I know that sounds barbaric to some of you...but that was the only way you could find out how much money you had. Online banking? Pfff!) She looked it up...and gave me the number. But she must have been mistaken. It was too much. I asked her to double-check. She did and got the same number. Then she said, "It looks like someone made a deposit to your account." To this day, I have no idea who did that. But this unexpected gift was a godsend...literally, it seemed to me.

Now, did I earn that deposit? Was that my due? No...someone, in their grace credited money to my account. *That*, Paul says, is what happened between God and Abraham. Abraham believed God...he trusted God...and God "deposited" righteousness into his account. It was absolutely unmerited. It certainly wasn't because of his good works; he was an "ungodly" pagan at the time. But God offered a covenant... Abraham took him at his word...and because he believed God, he was credited with a righteous, holy standing before the Lord that he had not earned.

"But wait a second!" Paul's Jewish readers would protest. "It was *because* of Abraham's faithfulness that God called him righteous. Because Abraham was circumcised ...because Abraham obeyed God's law." This is what the rabbis taught! It was a fundamental tenet of their faith that God rewarded Abraham with righteousness *because* of his obedient good works. But Paul is about to drop a major stink-bomb on that party.

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.
Romans 4: 9-12

This is a shocking revelation of simple logic. Abraham *couldn't* have been declared righteous *because* he was circumcised...why? Because God made his covenant with Abraham and declared him righteous in Genesis chapter 15...and he wasn't circumcised until chapter 17...24 years later when he was 99 years old! And God certainly didn't declare Abraham to be righteous because he obeyed God's law. Why? Because the law wasn't given for another 400 years! To Moses.

In other words, Paul proves to the rule-following Jews that the religious work of circumcision could *not* be a prerequisite for Abraham's righteousness because God *declared* him righteous while he was still an uncircumcised pagan. Circumcision was a *sign* of his righteousness, not the cause of it. And if *that* didn't shake 'em up, he concludes by pointing out that, when you think about it, Abraham was really the father of the Gentiles *before* he was the father of the Jews: Romans 4:11: *The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised....*

In other words, God did it all. God chose Abraham, God called him into covenant, God brought new life to old barren bodies...God did everything. All that remained for Abraham to do was what? Believe. "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness." And, of course, that is *all* that is left for us to do, too. The *only* thing we can do to receive this grace-gift is what? Believe it! Have "faith."

And we need to be clear about this: even our "faith" is not a contribution to our salvation. It's not as if God contributes the gift salvation and we contribute our good, strong, faith in partnership. Otherwise, even "faith" becomes a work by which we can at least pay for part of our gift. If we have strong faith...if we have real faith...if we have pure faith. No! Faith is simply receiving the gift God has given us. It is the parched man slurping down the water he has been offered. Or as one commentator put it, "Faith is like the hands of a beggar; only useful if empty."

Now...if you were a religious Jew raised to believe that by doing good works...by being circumcised...by obeying the law...by going to synagogue...by being nice to your neighbor... that you would earn God's favor...in other words, if all your religious life you assumed God liked you better than the Gentiles...that he saved you because you behaved yourself and obeyed his rules...then everything Paul just said would be shocking and outrageous.

That's what Pauls' Jewish readers would have felt. And before you dismiss this part of the conversation as irrelevant (since you aren't Jewish) let me just say this: the average American Christian believes the same thing! He obeys the rules, mostly; he goes to church... usually; he is nice to his neighbors...occasionally. He is certainly a better person than mean old what's his face next door. The average American Christian views God like Santa Claus; he's got a naughty list and a nice list. And if you're *MOSTLY* nice...you get the goodies. As long as God grades on the curve, there are going to be plenty of naughtier ones that, by comparison, make you look pretty darned good!

Unfortunately, God doesn't grade on the curve. It is Pass/Fail...and the standard is what? Perfection. When Rachel graduated from Whitworth, a small group of students were awarded the President's Cup for achieving a perfect 4.0 GPA. Alas, our daughter was not on that list. She had a pathetic 3.98 GPA because she got two A-minuses, including one for Jazz band because she missed a rehearsal when she came home early for Thanksgiving. If you know Rachel, you know how ticked she was not to win the President's Cup. And of course, we were so ashamed; we dropped our head in embarrassment as she received her diploma, disappointed at her inadequacy.

Not that Rachel didn't try to fix it! She petitioned professors, she pestered, she offered to do extra credit...anything to reach that mark of perfection. But she fell short. It didn't matter that she fell *BARELY* short...she was as truly off the list as the barely-scraping-by D student.

We may be better than a lot of people we know. But God doesn't grade on a curve. It is pass/fail...and his standard is 100%. But, graciously, God credits our account with the perfection of his own Son. We don't have to try harder; don't have to petition for a reconsideration. We simply believe and receive this incredibly kind gift.

That is justification by faith. We are made holy solely by the saving work of Jesus who was sent as an act of supreme grace by our heavenly Father. And this sticks in the craw of most human beings. Because we want to believe that we bring something to the table! Many Christians and virtually all "religious" Americans view salvation as a collaborative effort. God does his part...we do our part...and we are saved. But justification by faith says that ALL we can do is believe and receive this incredible grace-gift of God. English theologian, John Stott, puts it this way.

"No other...religion proclaims a free forgiveness and a new life to those who have done nothing to deserve it but a lot to deserve judgment instead. On the contrary, all other systems teach some form of self-salvation through good works of religion, righteousness or philanthropy. Christianity, by contrast, is not in its essence a religion at all; it is a gospel, the gospel, good news that God's grace has turned away his wrath, that God's Son has died our death and borne our judgment, that God has mercy on the undeserving and that there is nothing left for us to do, or even contribute. Faith's only function is to receive what grace offers."

To bring this home, think about it this way. I want you to formulate your answer to the following question: If you were standing before the gates of heaven and God asked you, "Why should I let you into my heaven?"...what would your answer be? Truly...imagine right now what your first sentence would be. OK...ready? If your answer started with, "Because I," it's probably wrong. "Because I tried to be a good person" or "Because I obeyed the 10 commandments" or "Because I was a member of Chapel Hill" or "Because I was a good husband or good father or good friend" If that is your gut response, then you do not understand justification by faith.

The *only* answer to that hypothetical question *must* start with "Because you..." Because YOU loved me. Because YOU reached out to me. Because YOU sent your Son to save me. Because YOU sent your Holy Spirit to woo me and to forgive me and to change me and to adopt me as your child." The *only* answer we can offer for why we are saved... starts with "you," not "I."

"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."