

Through the Righteousness of Faith

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Have any of you gone online to discover what makes you uniquely you? The advertisement says: Uncover your ethnic mix, distant relatives, and even new ancestor with AncestryDNA; or build our family tree, and watch your story emerge. Trace your family story with a family tree – we make it easy. Just start with what you know. Add a few family members to your tree, and we'll search for them in our record collections. Look for a leaf. The leaf is a hint – it means we've found something intriguing that may match your ancestor. View the hint, and save it to your tree. The hint could reveal a new name to search or even a new ancestor to add to your tree. Watch your family story emerge. The more you add, the more hints you get. And gradually your family story becomes clearer. After all, your family story is the story that leads to your. Unlock the family story in your DNA. Your DNA can reveal your ethnic mix and ancestors you never knew you had – places and people deep in your past where records can't always take you. Try AncestryDNA, and get a new view into what makes you uniquely you.

The site even gives stories from their members: “Holy crow? I’m related to George Washington.” Just days after beginning her family history search, Emily discovered a truly legendary ancestor. With the help of Ancestry Hints, she traced her family all the way back to her ten-times great grandmother, who just so happened to also be George Washington’s aunt. Emily found a presidential cousin! Who could be hiding in your family tree?

Paul says we in the church have one better – we can trace our ancestry back to Abraham – not in the flesh, but through the Righteousness of Faith. Paul teaches us that we can go straight to the example of Abraham to teach us that our salvation has come to us through grace rather than the law. Clearly Abraham is the father of Israel; this accounts for Paul's turning to Abraham to support his position that Christian Gentiles are full members of the community of faith. Paul goes on in support of his position to claim Abraham as the spiritual father of all the nations, of all "those who share the faith of Abraham" (4:16, 17). Over the centuries the church has struggled with issues of law and grace, of cultural practices versus eternal principles, and of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, but we always come back to the fact that Abraham is our father through the righteousness of faith. The God of Abraham is also the God of Jesus. But Orthodox Judaism saw Abraham as keeping the law by anticipation and therefore in accord with the Mosaic tradition; Paul saw Abraham as preceding the law and therefore saved by faith.

As spiritual children of Abraham, Paul ask us to have: a commitment to unity, recognition that love does not depend on uniformity but welcomes a diversity of gifts; and a priority for mission, coming together with all our diversity, sharing gifts to reach out to those who need good news. **Ward B. Ewing**

Another way to view this text is to admit our confusion about the sequencing of two basic dynamics of Christian faith and life: discipleship and the act of worship that is our response to the unmerited gift of faith. Worship is our praise of the God who first loved us. It is praise for the creation God called into existence out of "things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). It is praise for redemption through Christ who "died for the ungodly"

(Rom. 5:6). It is praise for the sustaining work of the Holy Spirit in us interceding "with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). In any act of worship we assume the role of grateful, albeit unworthy creatures who praise our Creator.

The problem is that we create the impression that discipleship has to come before worship. Often our emphasis in the church is on what we are to do for God, what we need to accomplish for God and provide for God, for God's church, and for God's kingdom. We don't explicitly say we are obligated to do all this before we can bask in God's love and favor, but the impression is created. We have to do God's work before we can savor God's love. We have somehow to prove we merit God's love by our good works for God.

Unfortunately, this unspoken, and to some degree unintended, message coincides with a very strong social message: that you have to work for whatever you are going to receive. This is a universal message; it is hardly limited to the United States, but it is certainly strong in our highly individualistic and competitive society. Over and over again we are told we have to work for what we expect to earn or receive. Parents pass on to children a prevailing belief that you have to work for what you expect to receive. Early in our lives it is hardwired into us. As the text puts it, wages are not a gift but what is due because of work.

So an implicit message in the church and an explicit message in our society conspire to lead people to believe they will be entitled to God's love and worthy of God's love only if they earn it.

Along the way, there are some language problems, especially with the word "righteousness," which appears several times in these verses and is key to what is being said here. "Righteousness" is not exactly on everyone's

tongue, and usually when it is spoken, there is a noticeable shading of disdain. The traditional definition of "righteousness" has been "to live in a right relationship with God and with other people." The Scriptures teach us how these are done in the Ten Commandments and the Great Commandment among others. So "righteousness" emphasis is on the relationship it points to. The relationship is with God, not God's decrees.

Closely related is the problem with the word "law." It is easy to view something like law as a legalistic intrusion. However, we don't throw out God's law because the "law" is useful in telling us what beliefs and behaviors please God.

In our culture, especially among younger Christians, faith is seen as the experience of relationships: relationships with God and with other people in the community of faith and outside of it as well. The heart and soul of Paul's message is the proclamation of the unmerited grace that comes from God to us. God's grace is evident in God's choice to love us, which sets us in a right relationship with God. This grace is brought to us in Jesus Christ. As Luther discovered to his great joy, after years of trying to be righteous by his good works, it is simply by faith that we enter into a right relationship with God. "Faith" has three dimensions: trust in God, beliefs about God, and the way of life we are led into by faith. Paul's emphasis is on faith as trust. Faith for Abraham was a willingness to trust in God. He did not have to earn it. He did not have to embark on the long pilgrimage and find his way to that distant land in order for God to love him. He did not even have to take the first step. He was loved, deemed worthy, and called to a new life before he had done anything.

The wellspring of our worship is discovered when we realize we stand before God incapable of earning God's grace and are instead worthy of that grace simply by God's blessed choice.

So we are inspired to say that the Christian life does not consist of doing good works to earn God's love; rather, and wonderfully, it consists of doing good works because of God's love. Discipleship is still important, always important, an integral expression of our faith; yet it follows from, is inspired by, and is sustained by our worship and thanksgiving. **Laird J. Stuart**

In our competitive, achievement-driven values of Western society, it is difficult for us to accept God's gift of grace through righteousness of faith. We want to earn salvation. In Western culture, whether we wear work jeans or starched collars, we are conditioned from birth by the supposition that we are "the masters of our fate, the captains of our soul." Paul could only grimace at this idea that we have the natural capacity and capability for spiritual self-fulfillment. Paul's claim is for salvation by faith alone. If Abraham, our spiritual father was counted as righteous 430 years before Moses and the Law, we are made righteous through faith. Grace abounds!

Don Wardlaw

In my own life, I listened to sermons about grace, but still thought I had to be good enough and work hard enough for God to love me. It was only as an adult that I understood the joy of salvation through the righteousness of faith. I pray that you will believe and accept God's grace and salvation for yourself through the righteousness of faith. Grace truly does abound!

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