

Faith Counted as Righteousness

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Date: 12 March 2017

[0:00] Amen. Amen.

So, I saw an absolutely maddening exchange on the internet in the past week. Yeah, okay, well I'm talking about one in particular, not limiting that to one.

Now, for my own good, I probably should have given up Facebook for Lent, but I didn't do it, and I came to regret it. Now, a friend of mine was involved in a debate, and someone put forward the idea that somewhere between the Old Testament and the New Testament, God changed.

He went from being the mean, cranky, vindictive Old Testament God to the warm, fuzzy, friendly New Testament God. And I felt like shouting, knock it off.

Have you seen that argument before? This is not the first time I've encountered that argument.

Sometimes I've encountered variations of it from people who should really know better, even.

[1:36] So, the argument is that we have the grumpy, temperamental God of the Old Testament versus the nice God we have in the New Testament. Now, it's pretty remarkable that that idea is still around, because we've been fighting it for a good 1900 years.

Yet, we still have to deal with it. Now, if you want to disprove that idea very, very quickly, open up your New Testament, open up the book of Revelation, read for about 30 seconds, and you'll see that in the New Testament, just like the Old, sometimes God is righteously angry.

But we have to ask, do you think this person was right? Do you think that the Old Testament and the New Testament are at odds with each other?

Did things change so fundamentally? God's character doesn't change. He's always been loving and holy. He's always been merciful and just. We see that in both Testaments.

So, is there a contradiction between the Old Testament and the New Testament? Or, as we could put it, is the Old Testament contrary to the New?

[2:53] I'm glad that you asked, because as Anglicans, our articles of religion take up that very question. If you're interested in seeing what I'm about to cite, you can open your prayer book to the historical documents section, knock the dust off, and follow along.

It says, the Old Testament is not contrary to the New. For both in the Old and New Testament, everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only mediator between God and man, being both God and man.

So, what does that mean? Well, let's think of it this way. Has there ever been more than one way to have everlasting life?

What do you think? And, to illustrate that very point, we have our reading from Romans for today, because our epistle talks about Abraham, and it talks about us.

It talks about how Abraham was saved, and it talks about how we are saved. Now, ready for the surprise? Abraham was saved in the same way that we are.

[4:10] We are his children in that way. So, let's look at our epistle reading for this morning, Romans 4. But first, before we dive in, let's think a little bit about context. Before this point in Romans, Paul has been making the argument that we are justified in the sight of God apart from works of the law.

Paul's argument is that it's not by what we have done, but through faith that we are justified. Now, to prove this point, and to demonstrate that he is not coming up with some newfangled idea, Paul turns his attention in Romans 4 to Abraham, who is, of course, the forefather of all the Jews according to the flesh, in order to demonstrate that he was justified apart from works of the law. So let's look and see what Paul has to tell us starting in verses 1 and 2. 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. Now, Paul is not wasting any time getting right down to the core of the argument.

If Abraham was justified by works of the law, then he would have something to boast about, wouldn't he? He'd have demonstrated his moral goodness, his superiority to other people.
[5:39] But could Abraham, even Abraham, the great patriarch, boast before God? Of course not. Why is that?

Well, verse 3, what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. So Paul is citing Genesis 15 in making this claim.

Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Does it say that Abraham was saved by his righteousness according to works of the law?

No. Abraham believed God and through faith righteousness was counted to him. And Paul begins to unpack all of this a little more in verses 4 and 5 where he writes, 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. Paul's point here is that the righteousness that was counted to Abraham was not something that he earned by his own works.

[6:58] Not something that belonged to him by right. And if that's the case it must have been a gift. And like all gifts it was free and unearned.

And that is amazing. Paul is saying here that God justifies the ungodly through faith.

Now if you've ever seen yourself as ungodly as I have most certainly seen myself that is good news to you. We have righteousness counted to us through faith.

That's something that we don't deserve. The righteousness that we're talking about here isn't ours it's the righteousness of Jesus credited to us through faith.

It's free. It's grace. It is a gift. And to drive the point home Paul cites Psalm 32 in verses 6 and 7.

Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.

[8:27] So to further demonstrate his point Paul cites David king of Israel he cites more Old Testament scripture in order to demonstrate that God through faith counts the one who believes as righteous apart from works to demonstrate here that Paul isn't coming up with some new idea.

So let me ask you brothers and sisters how are our lawless deeds forgiven? How are our sins covered? how can it be that the Lord will not count our sin against us?

Well our lawless deeds are forgiven through the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. Our sins are covered by his blood shed for us.

Our sins are not counted against us because Christ has suffered and satisfied justice on our behalf and paid that debt. those are things that we have not earned.

Things that we haven't deserved. And how are those things ours? Those benefits are given to us as a free gift through faith. Now in Paul's context in the New Testament era the question naturally would have arisen.

[9:51] Who is this blessing of righteousness apart from works of the law intended for? Who does it apply to? Is it just for the Jews? Is it for Abraham's children according to the flesh?

Just for those who were circumcised as Abraham was? Well Paul addresses that question and we see his answer to that in verses 9 and 10.

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.

So here's Paul's argument. The blessing is to all who believe both those who are circumcised and those who are uncircumcised. To demonstrate his point Paul points out that righteousness was counted to Abraham before he was circumcised.

[10:57] And if this righteousness through faith was Abraham's before he was circumcised, then this blessing is also for those who aren't circumcised. It's for all who have faith in Christ, whether they're Jews or Gentiles, everyone from every tribe, nation, and language who believes the gospel.

And Abraham who believed God and had that counted to him as righteousness, he is an example and a father to all of us who believe God and have it counted to us as righteousness, whether we're Jews or Gentiles.

Paul moves on in verses 11 and 12. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

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, who are not merely circumcised, but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

So, Abraham already had righteousness counted to him through faith before he was circumcised, and received circumcision as the seal of what he already had.

[12:35] What does that mean? Well, that makes him the father of all believers, those who aren't circumcised, but imitate Abraham's faith by believing the gospel, as well as the father of Jewish believers who are circumcised, but are more than merely circumcised in the flesh, who walk in Abraham's footsteps through faith in Jesus.

As our Old Testament reading appointed for this morning reminds us, God has indeed made of Abraham a great nation, as he is the father of all those across the centuries, across the world, who have faith in Jesus, who believe God, and receive the free gift of righteousness through faith.

So, our readings here this morning remind us that our salvation is a free gift. It's given to us by grace through faith in what Christ has done for us.

It's not something that we can earn. No one has ever deserved it. No one has ever merited it.

And thank God I don't have to deserve it. I don't have to merit it. Why? Because Jesus has purchased it for me with his blood. Jesus has merited it for me by his perfect obedience.

[14:01] I am called, as are all of us, simply to receive it. As the amazing gift that it is through faith in Christ and him crucified. And it's actually good that we get this reminder right in the middle of Lent.

In Lent, we spend a lot of time reflecting on our sins and talking about self-denial. And those are good things. There's a reason the church has been doing that for centuries.

But, if we don't approach it with the right attitude, we can go really off track. What do I mean by that? It is dangerous to think that we can make up for our sins, to think that we can atone for our sins by beating ourselves up and by acts of self-denial.

You could give up chocolate for the rest of your life, and you wouldn't make up for your sins. You'd probably just be miserable. Or we could weep over our sins every second of every day for the rest of our lives, and we wouldn't be able to cover our sins to put them away.

We could beat ourselves until we bleed, and that wouldn't do it either. There is only one way to be saved, to be right before God, and that is through receiving the righteousness of Christ counted to us through faith.

[15:39] So, why is it we are saved apart from works of the law? We spend so much time thinking on God's law, reflecting on it during Lent.

Why are we seeking to amend our lives? Well, I think that there are a couple of reasons. Things.

Think for a second about God's commandments, and how you measure up.

Just think about the Decalogue for a moment, the Ten Commandments. Stack yourself up next to that standard. I'll be honest with you, I don't measure up very favorably when I do that.

Certainly not according to the standard of perfection. What about you? What effect does that have on us when we realize that, when we reflect on God's law and we consider ourselves in light of it? I hope the effect it has is that it causes us to realize just how much we need Jesus. We need a gift of righteousness that is not our own. But what about the focus in Lent on amendment of life?

[16:50] There is nothing we can do to make up for our sins, to put them away, to earn our salvation. Well, Jesus says in John 14, if you love me, you will keep my commandments.

So when we talk about amendment of life, we're talking about growing in holiness, growing in obedience, striving to keep the commandments of our Lord, just as he instructed us.

But notice that Jesus doesn't say that we keep his commandments in order to be justified by our works. We're called to keep his commandments because we love him.

Out of love and gratitude for what he has done for us, not in order to add to what he has done for us. We can't add to his righteousness. It's perfect. There's nothing to add.

We fall short, but the righteousness of Jesus, which is ours through faith, will never fall short. When you think of what is yours as a free gift, doesn't that make you want to grow in your obedience to him?

[18:00] Doesn't that make you want to obey him because you love him? In Lent, we are not seeking to learn how to be saved according to the works of the law. If that is what we're doing, we're doing it wrong.

We are seeking to learn what it means to live obediently. In gratitude for being saved by grace apart from works of the law.

And that difference is huge. When I think about Jesus, when I think about what he's done for me, when I think about how because of him my lawless deeds are forgiven, my sins are covered, my sins aren't counted against me, when I think about that and the proper response to that, I can't help but think of the words of the great hymn writer Isaac Watts, who put it this way, we're the whole realm of nature mine, that we're an offering far too small, love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.

May those words reflect the attitudes of our hearts in the season of Lent and always. in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.