

Romans: Faith and the Law

Romans 4:13-15

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 4, as we continue to study together through this glorious book. Our minds are very much on the incarnation just now. We're singing about it. We're listening to others sing about it. We're reflecting on it, perhaps individually. And it's important to realize that the incarnation itself proves that salvation is by grace, and not by our works. If salvation were by our law keeping, if salvation were by our obedience to God's commands, then Jesus would not have had to come in the flesh. He would not have had to live obediently under His Father's commands on our behalf. And so His advent, His coming proves that salvation is by God's promise, not by our obedience. It's by faith, not by works.

That's the subject that Paul has been talking about since Romans 3:21, and we've said a number of times as we've worked through these passages that there's no more important question than how can a man be right with God? And Paul's answer to that question is that a man is made right with God by faith. That is, by faith, man trusting in Christ, receives the righteousness of Christ, and so God's declaration that we are right with Him. In Romans 3, 21 through 31, he explains that teaching. In Romans, chapter 4, he defends that teaching from the Old Testament. In verses 1 through 3, he tells us that Abraham was justified by faith. In verse 4 through 8 he tells us that David understood and taught and believed in justification by faith. And he tells us a little bit about what it means to have Christ's righteousness credited to us, using that wonderful word imputed.

In verses 9 through 12, he again asserts that justification by faith is open to everybody. It's not just open to physical descendants of Abraham who keep the ceremonial law of Moses. It's open to everyone, Jew and Gentile. And that brings us to the passage today. Paul wants us to understand justification. It's absolutely essential. It's something necessary for our salvation, for our assurance and for our discipleship. So let's give attention to God's word here in Romans 4, beginning in verse 13. This is God's word. Hear it reverently and attentively.

"For the promise to Abraham, or to his descendants, that he would be heir of the world was not through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those

who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void, and the promise nullified; for the law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord, this is Your word. We ask that all those who come believing this word to be Your truth, and those who come believing Jesus Christ to be the one offered for sin, and the only salvation of sinners. We pray that for them this word would be an encouragement, that they would be deepened in their understanding of what You have done for them that they might be called right with God. Heavenly Father, for those who come this day not trusting in Jesus Christ, not embracing Him as He is offered in the gospel. We pray that this would be the day of salvation, that they would have their eyes and hearts open to the truth of the word. As they see Your love displayed, and Your wisdom and Your plan of salvation. This we ask earnestly, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Often, we hear people tell us that Christianity's exclusive truth claims are offensive to them. We live in a day and age where it's okay to have your own opinion as long as you don't think that you're right. I mean it's okay for you to believe that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world as long as you don't want everybody else to believe that. Or as long as you don't impose your beliefs on them. In that case, you would be narrow-minded and bigoted. We often hear Christianities' exclusive truth claims criticized as being narrow and unloving. When we celebrate Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation, we are sometimes accused of being bigoted, prejudiced and arrogant. Those are the things we can put in print. Now, indeed, one reason so many people in our society want to expunge all traces of Christianity from the public sector is precisely derived from the offensiveness of the claims of the gospel. The gospel says that Jesus is the one way, whereby a man can be made right with God. And there are some people for which that assertion is, frankly, offensive. They take issue with it, and they don't want to have it in front of their eyes in the public sectors of society. They are quite happy for you to keep that to yourself in your own house, or perhaps in your own place of worship. But just don't bring that outside. Don't set that outdoors anywhere. Don't make any claims on them. Paul, in this passage, actually leads us to a very surprising truth. He reminds us that if there is salvation outside of Jesus Christ, then God is not more loving; He's less loving. Now that's a fairly tantalizing and provocative statement. I'm going to leave that dangling for a moment and come back to it in a few minutes. I'd like to walk with you through this passage as Paul presses that argument, looking with you at three things.

First of all, in verse 13. Paul there announces that Abraham is the heir of the world, and that's a tantalizing phrase, too. He's the heir of the world by faith. He's stressing that it's by faith that Abraham receives the promises. Then in verse 14 he goes on to make this argument: There cannot be two ways to receive God's promise. There is only one way to receive God's promise. And then finally in

verse 15, he tells us that in this fallen world, sinners like ourselves cannot earn God's favor by the law. The only thing that we can earn by the law is God's punishment, God's condemnation, God's wrath. Now I'd like to walk through those three things with you this morning. Let's look at verse 13 first.

I. Abraham is the heir of the world by faith.

Here, Paul tells us that Abraham is the heir of the world by faith. In this little verse, Paul teaches us that our personal obedience to God's standards of righteousness is not the basis of our inheriting God's promises. Our personal obedience is not the basis whereby we receive the things that God has promised to us in His word. Remember Paul is addressing a people here who have an enormous respect for law, and rightly so. The prophets had warned them that because of their disobedience, they were going to be sent into exile. They spent seventy years in exile, and when they came out of exile, I think one thing was emblazoned on their minds and hearts. We're not going to make that mistake again. And so they were very, very devoted to the law of God. Unfortunately, that devotion to the law of God became misshapen and warped. And they began to think that the law of God was the instrument by which they were made righteous before Him, and it was the instrument whereby they received all the promises that God had made to them. In other words, it led them into a rampant legalism which existed in Jesus' and Paul's day. And here Paul, who had just pointed out to them, that Abraham was declared righteous. He was justified by faith before he was circumcised, before he was given that ceremonial sign of circumcision.

Now in verse 13 he is reminding them that the justification which Abraham received came more than 430 years before Moses announced God's divinely revealed law from Mt. Sinai. So before Moses gave God's summary of His moral code to the people of God by more than 430 years God had declared Abraham to be just. He had justified Abraham, declared him to be righteous by faith, long before Moses had delivered God's summary of the law. And so it's very clear from that that God's law is not the instrument by which Abraham was declared accepted by God. And in this little verse, verse 13, Paul focuses our attention on three things.

I'd like you to look at them with me for a moment. He shows us the object of God's promise, he shows us the nature of the inheritance, and he shows us the means whereby that inheritance is received. And in all those things, he points to this truth of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

First of all, notice those who are the recipients, the objects of this promise, "To Abraham or to his descendants," he says in verse 13. The covenant of grace, in other words -- and Paul, this is not the first time that Paul has said this in Romans, and it won't be the last time, the covenant promises that God gave to Abraham were merely for him. Nor were they merely for his immediately family.

Nor were they merely for the Old Testament people of God. The promises that God gave to Abraham were to his seed, his descendants. All those who shared like faith with Abraham in God and His promises. In other words, Paul is saying to the people assembled there, and he's saying to you, the promises that God gave to Abraham are for you. They are for us. They're not just something for the Old Testament people of God. Those promises are for us. He's reminding us then that the objects of God's promise are not merely Abraham and his physical descendants but all who trust in God, through Christ.

Secondly, notice he speaks of the nature of the inheritance, and he uses an extravagant phrase. Abraham was what? He was the *heir of the world*. Now don't let the Israeli Parliament find out about that. You see, Paul is using this extravagant word to describe what God has promised Abraham. Now we know in Genesis that God doesn't use exactly that language, but you know Paul's language here summarizes so many things that God did explicitly say to Abraham. Among them, he said that by Abraham, all the families of the earth would be blessed. You remember how the prophets looked for a day when all the nations would come to Mt. Zion and worship God there? Paul is saying that in the gospel that promise is being fulfilled, and that is a promise that is not only made to Abraham, but it's made to every believer. We live in a world where often times our witness is rejected. And it can be very discouraging. But Paul is reminding us that one of the promises that God has given is that He will be faithful to bring the nations to worship Jesus Christ. He, you are the heir of the world in Jesus Christ. And it's clear even from the nature of that inheritance, that salvation has to be by grace. How could you ever earn the right to be the heir of the world? You never could. So from the very nature of the inheritance, we see that salvation is by grace. But He's not done.

He goes on to point at the means of the receipt of that inheritance. Notice again his words, verse 13: Not through the law or maybe better, not through law, but through the righteousness of faith. In other words, Paul is saying, "Faith, not obedience is the instrument by which we receive God's promise." Even more importantly he's saying faith in and of itself doesn't say it's the righteousness of Christ credited to us and received by faith that saves. The way you receive this blessing. The way you receive this promise. The way you become an heir is by faith. And yet as in Paul's day, so also today, there are many, many people who think that the way that you are accepted by God is to be good. The way that you are accepted by God is to be good. The way you are to be accepted by God is to be moral. The way that you are accepted by God is to keep His Commandments, or to keep moral commandments in general; to be a nice person is a downscale sort of way of describing that. And Paul is directly contradicting that. He knows it's our natural tendency to think that we need to clean ourselves up in order to be accepted by God. And he is emphatic in stressing that that is not the way that God has appointed for us to be embraced. And, in fact, I'm going to argue in just a few moments not only is it not the basis of our inheriting God's promises, it calls into question the love of God. To say that we are saved by our own obedience

calls into question the love of God.

Now how does Paul argue that case? Well, you'll see it in verse 14. He says that there cannot be two ways to obtain the promise. "If those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise nullified." Paul is saying here that the assertion that we can save ourselves by being good, actually assumes that God is less loving, rather than more loving. I've already thrown that out and not answered it, so let me begin to answer that for you. Again, remember Paul is speaking to people who believe the victim that obedience to the law brings righteousness. If you obey the law, you will be pronounced righteous. And they also believe not only that the law brings righteousness, but they believe that those who are righteous will, by that righteousness, receive what? The reward, the inheritance, the promise. So it's very clear. You're righteous, you're pronounced righteous. You're pronounced righteous, you receive the promise.

And to shock them out of their slumber, because the apostle Paul has already made it absolutely air-tight clear in chapter 2 and 3 that nobody keeps the law, nobody obeys the law, nobody fits into the category of being a good person, being a nice person, being a person who keeps the commands, being a person who keeps the law. He makes this argument to shock them out of their slumber, he juxtaposes obedience in law and faith and promise. And he says, "Look, it can't be both ways. If salvation is by being good, if salvation is by keeping the commands, then it makes faith and it makes the promise void. It deprives them of value, it renders them worthless. And so those who contend that we can be saved, that we can experience God's goodness, that we can have a relationship with Him forever just by being good, are contradicting God's promise," Paul says. Now how can that be? Well, he begins to spell it out here in verses 14 and 15.

II. You cannot be saved by being good.

He says basically it does it in two ways. First of all he says, "Having already made it clear that nobody is good," if you say then that the way you are accepted by God is by being good, then Paul's answer is, "Okay, well that's easy. Nobody will be saved. You've made void the promise, there's nobody who'll receive the promise if you're saved by being good, nobody will be saved, because there is only one who is good, and that is God in Christ Jesus." So Paul says, "All those promises mean nothing if the way that you get them is through your own moral uprightness, through your own goodness, through your own law keeping, through your own obedience, through your own efforts." "That's the first way," he says, "because no one has actually kept the law. You make the promise void."

Furthermore, and this is a second way that you make the promise void. You see if you suggest that God loves only those who earn His love, that God accepts those only who do enough to please Him, that God bestows His promise on those who first love Him. If you are to boldly, one who says God loves us

because we first loved Him; because we first obeyed Him. We have turned the scripture on its head because that's not what the Bible says. The Bible says we love Him because He first loved us. Paul is saying "If you teach that salvation is by your goodness, if you teach it's by your obedience, then you're saying that God only saves those who love Him and obey Him first. And because they love Him and obey Him, He saves them." In other words, they save themselves. They earn their salvation, they have to condition God's love by their obedience. And you know what? It makes us more loving than God.

I don't whether you've been following the news about it recently, but since September the Vatican has been in a little bit of public relations nightmare. Cardinal Ratzinger released a document that basically said that the Roman Catholic church was the only way of salvation. And as you might imagine, the secular media didn't like that very much. And so recently, the Vatican has released another statement, and it says, "Oh, no, we didn't mean that. What we really meant was everybody who is good gets into heaven." And that was their way of trying to respond to that public relations nightmare.

Well, let me transpose that into a Protestant setting and say that we face that same kind of pressure from the world when we proclaim that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. People immediately respond, and they said, "Hold on, that's narrow minded. There are Buddhists out there. They don't believe we need salvation. There are Muslims out there. They don't think that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, and for you to say that, well I mean it's unloving, it's narrow minded, it's bigoted. It would be much more loving, more broad and great minded of you to say that everybody who's good is saved."

But I want you to pause and think about that for a minute. Paul is saying if you say that salvation is based on people being good, then you are saying that people have to save themselves, and God has to wait until they're good in order to pronounce His blessing and promise on them when that's so different from the much more glorious story told in the word of God which is while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly. He reached out to us not because we were lovely, not because we were loving, not because we were good, but in spite of the fact that we weren't any of those things. And in Jesus Christ He gave His beloved Son to die in our place. That's a far more loving God than a God who accepts those who are good and reject those who are not good enough. Now you see our salvation is not based on anything in us. There's nothing in us that draws God to love us. His Son's righteousness, His Son's obedience. That's the thing we need. And by faith we receive it. You see that is what Paul is talking about when you say that salvation is by being good, you're making God less loving, not more.

III. The Law will condemn us if we try to earn our salvation.

Finally, Paul concludes this argument in verse 15 by pointing out that in our fallen condition, as sinners, sinners that we are, the law can only ultimately earn us God's wrath. It can't earn us God's favor. Trying to earn God's promises by being good will never, ever work. Your attempts at goodness will only bring God's wrath. Remember again Paul's audience believed that the law brought righteousness. And he here boldly asserts, "Oh, no, in fact the law brings wrath." The law brings condemnation. We live in a fallen world, and apart from grace, the law only ultimately brings condemnation. The law demonstrates that we have violated God's standards, and it brings wrath. And it's very interesting to see how the tune of people changes when that reality of the law is brought to bear. You know, when the law is on your side, it's amazing how people like to speak about the rule of law. But when the judgment goes as the opposite direction, it's funny how insignificant the rule of law is to them. The people will give lip service to God's standards and being good, but apart from grace nobody likes the law. Apart from grace, when you really sit down and think about the law, you know that it condemns you.

We've seen a living example of this during the last month or so. There have been a lot of people who have made high-minded speeches about heeding the courts and the rule of law, but when the judgment went against them, what was the reaction? You see, it's just like that with the law of God. People can talk about, well God will accept me because I'm good. But you begin to tell them what God's standards are, and you begin to tell them what God's standard of judgment is against them, and you know what they will think of the law? They'll hate the law. The law won't save them. The law condemns them.

But God, you see, God so loved the world that He gave His Son, and His Son came into the world and obeyed the law, that all those who trust in Him might receive His righteousness and be saved. Accepted by God, not because of something that they did, not because of something in them, not because of their being good, but because of His goodness. This is what Paul means when he says that we are justified by faith, not obedience. We're saved by the promise of God, not by the law. The law becomes our friend, once we're saved. And we can say with the Psalmist, "How I love Your law, O Lord." But before that, the law with regard to our salvation is but our enemy, and we'll be condemned by it. So I pray that this season of the year of all seasons you wouldn't trust in yourself, you'd trust in Christ. You won't trust in your goodness, or your niceness, but you'll trust in Christ's obedience. And when you do you'll find that despite what you deserve, you will be accepted by God now and forever. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, these truths are simple but important. Help us we pray to grasp them. Help us to bear witness to Christ and to live out the glory of this truth that we're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We ask it in His name, Amen.

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