

**Sunday Sermon: March 12, 2017**

**Sermon Text: Romans 4:1-5**

**Sermon Theme: By Faith and not by Works**

*What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? <sup>2</sup> If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. <sup>3</sup> What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

*<sup>4</sup> Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. <sup>5</sup> However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.*

On January 1, 1929 the California Golden Bears were playing the undefeated Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets in the Rose Bowl. It was the biggest game of many of the player’s college careers. When the opportunity for a big play came, defensive nose tackle, Roy Riegels was ready. When there Georgia Tech fumbled the ball, he scooped it up and began running as fast as he could towards the end zone.

His teammates ran behind him yelling at him at the top of their lungs. They were trying to catch up to him, but they weren’t cheering for him, or trying to block for him, they were trying to stop him.

In all of the confusion, Roy had picked up the ball and began running the wrong way. He was actually running towards the opponent’s end zone.

Have you ever found yourself running towards something only to realize that you were running toward the wrong goal the whole time?

What about our faith-life? Do we run towards the wrong thing instead of the right thing? We can. In the Word of God before us this morning, Paul tells us not to run to things that cannot save us, but to run to the things that can. He tells us that it is faith that saves and not works.

The Jews thought that they had heaven all figured out. They believed that the Law taught them heaven came through works. They believed that as long as they were obedient to that Law, did what was good and right, that they would earn their way to heaven.

What followed was a very carefully crafted set of rules and regulation that referenced the Law, but that cleverly overlooked some sins and increased some works over others. In short, the Jewish religion made some works look very good and made some sins look very bad. By focusing on these good works, the Jewish person could feel pretty good about themselves.

Paul is preaching a very long sermon in chapter 3 and 4 of Romans. In chapter 3, Paul has systematically torn apart the false teaching that heaven is earned by works or obedience to the Law. He has shown the people that the Law cannot declare people righteous, it can only show us what our sins are and convict of us those sins.

Paul often uses the picture of a court room and the court system when he talks about Law and Gospel. People put on trial when they have broken a law. People don’t get pulled into court in order to have a party and to show how good they are. A person is not put on trial to show their goodness. People are put on trial when they have done wrong and to punish them for that wrong.

The Law of the Lord was never meant to be a measuring stick of righteousness. It was never meant to bring people to heaven. God’s Law was given to show sin. To drive the sinner who sees his sin, to hopelessness in self so that we might see that we need help. The Law drives us to look for that help outside ourselves. Thankfully, God does not leave us without hope and help. He gives the wonderful news that we have a Messiah and Savior who helps us by taking away all of our sins.

Paul teaches in chapter 3 that we are not justified by means of the Law, rather, we are justified through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Paul is preaching this lengthy sermon to a group of people who had been taught that works and obedience did earn heaven. They used Abraham as their example. Their argument went like this. “If obedience to the Law doesn’t save, what about our father Abraham? Doesn’t his story show us that we can earn God’s favor by what we do?”

Paul replies, **“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? <sup>2</sup> If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. <sup>3</sup> What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”**

Abraham held a very special place in Jewish culture, tradition and religion. He was called Father Abraham because he was the father of the nation. He was also their religious father. Abraham was the one to whom God had made the covenant, the special promise. This special promise was that God would bless Abraham and his family. The Jews believed that God's special promise was made to the Jewish people for all eternity. Many even put their hope of salvation in the fact that they had Jewish blood in their veins.

While God did make that promise to Abraham, but the people didn't understand why. Their rabbis taught them that God had made this promise to Abraham because Abraham was special among all men and deserved this promise for his whole family for all eternity because he was righteous and perfect.

Paul answers a question with a question, "What did Abraham think about salvation? What did he discover in the matter?"

Was Abraham perfect? Of course not. Just like us, he did things that were faithful to the Lord and he did things that were not. He was faithful in trusting in the Lord to lead him on a great journey without knowing the outcome, he trusted in the Lord to provide him a home in this new land when he allowed Lot to have the choice land, he trusted in the Lord to bless him, not taking the spoils of war when he rescues Lot, and he trusted in the Lord when he was ready to sacrifice his son, Isaac to the Lord.

If Abraham were justified by his works, he would have reason to boast about them. But he has nothing to boast about before God because he was also a sinner and would be condemned for those sinful actions. Scripture shows us that Abraham had moments when he sinned and did not trust in the Lord as he should have. Not once, but twice, he was afraid and told a leader of a nation that his wife Sarai was his sister and not his wife, he did not trust in the Lord to provide a son for him, instead he tried to have his own heir with Hagar. The story of that son, Ishmael, is a sad story, and Abraham did not always trust in the Lord's promise to bless him and his family as he should have. The Lord had to repeat his promise to Abraham 3 times in order to build Abraham up and renew his faith.

What did Abraham discover in this matter about justification by works? Was he perfect? Did he earn that promise from God? No, he was a sinner who did not deserve or earn anything from God. Yet, God blessed him? Why? **Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.**

Many times in life, we might be running towards the wrong goal to get to heaven. If I can only follow God better, if only I can be a better Christian, if only I would stop doing this or that, if only I can give more to God, then I will feel better because then I will know that God loves me and forgives me. If this is our goal, we are running the wrong way because we are trying to rely on our works and not on God.

Paul says, "<sup>4</sup> **Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.** <sup>5</sup> **However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.**"

Many of us have worked a job in our lives. We got paid a salary or by the hour. Yet, were we always productive during the time we were working, or did we get paid for breaks, conversation time, private calls, bathroom breaks, times we failed and time that was unproductive? What would happen at work if you were paid only for your productivity and for the positive things you did? What if your screw-ups, your downtime, your failures, your breaks were subtracted from your account? How much would you be paid then?

We want God to give us credit for all those God-pleasing things we do. We want God to bless us because we do not steal, lie, covet, we have kind words all the time, we brought a friend to church, or we spoke up for the Lord. We want the Lord to credit those works to our account. Paul calls this credit wages.

But if we want that, God won't just pay us for our Godly actions, God will give us wages for 100% of our actions which also include those words and actions that are not so God-pleasing.

If we are running towards the goal of heaven through good works, there is no way that we can ever do enough good things in order to earn God's favor by being perfect. The Law shows us that we have many sins, probably many more sins than good.

Roy "Wrong Way" Riegels didn't score for the other team. His teammate Benny Lom ran him down at the 3 and managed to turn him around before he went into the end zone. When we are running towards good works for salvation we need someone to run after us and to turn us away from the goal of hell that salvation by works will lead to.

Jesus calls to us every day, Repent! Turn from your sins and turn to me! He calls to us even when we are chasing after sin and running towards our own works. He turns us away from sin and hell and shows us that the right way to forgiveness and the heaven we are looking for is through him.

Paul tells us that justification comes from God through faith in Jesus. Abraham believed, not on his own and not in himself. Abraham believed in the Messiah because the Holy Spirit worked faith in his heart. This faith worked by God moved him to act in a way that was God-pleasing. Through the Holy Spirit, Abraham believed in Jesus and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Our justification comes in the same way, not on our own and not by ourselves. The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts. This faith, worked by God, in what Jesus has done for us, is credited to our account as righteousness through Jesus, just as it was with Abraham.

So often in life we spend time chasing after the wrong things. Yet, one of the things that we should always run to is the forgiveness and eternal life our Savior gives to us. While the devil may tempt us to run after our own works for salvation, the Bible teaches us that our salvation is through Jesus alone and not by works.