

*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.*

*It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. <sup>14</sup> For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, <sup>15</sup> because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.*

*<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. <sup>17</sup> As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.*

*(Romans 4:1-5, 13-17)*

### Why Does Grace Matter?

I live in a parsonage. The church owns my house. That means that the utilities and the phone are in the church’s name. The phone number doesn’t usually change when a new pastor comes. Over the years, I’ve gotten many phone calls from telemarketers looking for a previous pastor or his wife or even his kids, sometimes years after they’ve moved out. The congregation I served before I came here to Peace, was named Grace. Just like here, Grace was short for Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church. One day, I answered the phone and this woman said to me, “Is Grace Evangel there?” To which I replied, “No, she’s not” and hung up.

If the person who put the information into their database had understood that our house belonged to a church and if that person had had any concept of what *grace* means, they might’ve saved that telemarketer a few minutes of her time. But there are much greater reasons to know what grace means. You can tell a great deal about a church by its definition of grace. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that grace is God’s undeserved help. The “undeserved” part of that definition is great. But the “help” part means that God isn’t getting us all the way to heaven. He’s *helping* us get there. Most Protestant churches say that grace is God’s undeserved love. That’s a much better definition. It reflects the fact that the Greek word for grace means a gift. You often hear that definition in the WELS and there’s nothing wrong with it. But our Lutheran fathers generally felt that that definition didn’t go far enough. They preferred to say that grace is God’s undeserved favor. It’s an attitude in God’s heart that drives him to save us, even though we don’t deserve it.

#### I.

Now, why does all that matter? That’s what St. Paul explains today. In this section of the book of Romans, he’s pounding away at the doctrine of God’s grace. He gives examples from the Old Testament and he uses real life situations to make it clear. You can’t read these chapters without getting a sense of just how much this teaching mattered to Paul. But why? **Why does grace matter? Because it’s the only way to heaven.**

Paul directs our attention to Abraham, the great Old Testament hero of faith. God had promised Abraham that he would give him a son and from that son, Abraham would have descendants that were as numerous as the stars in the sky. But God waited to give him that son until he was one hundred years old and his wife was ninety. God made Abraham’s son a miracle, so that it would be clear that Israel only existed because God had reached into history and created them. Years before that son was born, God made that promise to Abraham. And Paul quotes Moses, who wrote, **“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”**

Abraham was not righteous in God’s eyes because of anything he had done. God declared Abraham to be righteous for the simple reason that Abraham trusted God’s promise. Lest we get confused, St. Paul talks about the difference between a gift – grace – and something we earn – wages. He says, **“Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.”** When your boss pays you, is he or

she doing you a favor? No! If you did the work you were hired to do, they owe you that money. Even if they fire you, they still have to pay you for the time you already worked. But then Paul says, **“However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”** What is Paul saying? There are two ways that you can try to get into heaven. The most common way is by being a good person. You do the best you can. You try to do more good than evil. You make a difference in the lives of the people around you. Say it any way you want to say it, but you’re working – you’re trying to earn you way to heaven.

That’s the default setting of our sinful hearts. On TV and in movies, you often hear characters say that people deserve second chances or they deserve to be forgiven. If you think it through, those people are saying that they have earned the right to be forgiven. That’s what “deserve” means. But I don’t think most people have actually thought it through. What makes Paul’s point so difficult to understand today is that most people don’t believe that God would ever actually send people to hell. They make the bar of being “a good person” so low that anyone can get in, except maybe child molesters and white supremacists. Paul dealt with a very different reality. He dealt with people who set a high bar – obeying all the Old Testament law and rituals. If you did that, they thought you would be in. But it really doesn’t matter – low bar or high, any idea that God owes us heaven because we’re good people, or we did our best, or we raised good kids means that we have earned heaven. God owes it to us. That is not grace.

Guess what? It doesn’t get us in. That’s the point. Abraham was God’s chosen ancestor of Israel. He left all that he had and went to live in a foreign country just because God told him to. He even began to sacrifice that son that God gave him because God told him to. And he still wasn’t good enough to get in. God’s standard is much greater than just being a good person. God’s standard is perfection. Abraham – like us – showed again and again that perfection is out of reach. You and I need to understand that. We live in a world in which people are going to compliment us for the good lives we lead. But we can’t let their compliments confuse us about God’s standards. We don’t go to heaven because we come to church every Sunday or because we send our kids to Lutheran schools or because we make generous contributions to our church. We don’t go to heaven because we avoid sinful websites or because we go to pro-life rallies or because we work weekends at soup kitchens. If we point to any of those things, we’re saying to God, “See how good we are? See how much better we are than so many other people? You have to let us in.” If we say that to God, he’s going to say to us, “Fine. Let’s take a look at your life. Let’s look at every time you lost your temper with your spouse or your parents or your children. Let’s look at every time you stared out the window at church instead of actually paying attention. Let’s look at every time you looked at someone with lust in your heart or you were selfish. Let’s look at every sin in your life and then let’s hear the verdict: guilty.” That is all we can ever earn.

But grace offers us a different way to heaven. Grace teaches us that God turned away his anger and his justice and he turned a loving heart to us. God sent his Son Jesus to live in our place, and God sees us through him. God turned all the anger and justice he feels on that perfect Son and he punished him in our place. God raised him to say that his anger was satisfied. Then God sent that gospel to you and me, one by one, and he gave us faith. He taught us to trust in Jesus. Now, God counts us as holy and perfect – no matter how wicked we have been. God gives us the free gift of eternal life. Grace matters because it is the only real way to heaven.

## II.

St. Paul knew that grace goes against every fiber of our existence. That’s why all non-Christian religions focus on works. You have to fulfill the Five Pillars of Islam or you have to appease the gods or you have to be good enough to earn a better existence in the next life. We humans think that we can be better and so there must be a path to heaven for us. In the end, almost all Christian false teachings in some way or another attack the doctrine of grace. They make it God’s undeserved help. Or they tell us we have to make a decision to accept Jesus into our hearts. So Paul again invoked Abraham to show that works can’t get anyone to heaven. While Paul himself was Jewish and was raised hearing the stories about Abraham, most of the people he wrote to in Rome probably were Gentiles. But Abraham was still the example God gave to understand his grace and how far it extends. So **why does grace matter? Because it applies to everyone.**

Paul pointed to the promise that Abraham received. God actually gave it to him several times and said it different ways. One of God’s favorites was to say that through Abraham all nations on earth would be blessed. That’s because Jesus came to be the Savior of all nations. Paul points out that the very nature of faith is to trust in God’s grace instead of in what we do. Abraham’s faith came before his obedience. God didn’t promise

Abraham that he would inherit the earth because he did such a good job obeying. Abraham obeyed because he believed the promise. All the dramatic things he did were only signs that his faith was real. In that way, Abraham is the example of what faith is – imperfect, stumbling sinners cling to Jesus and strive to live for God, but fall flat on our faces day after day. And God’s grace forgives us day after day. And we start over, day after day.

God always planned for grace. That is the main lesson Abraham teaches. St. Paul said, **“Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.”** God was concerned about more than just the Jews. Everyone who shares the faith of Abraham is part of the true Israel of God. What was Abraham’s faith? It was faith in Christ. Jesus told the Jews, **“Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”** Abraham is in heaven today because he trusted in the Savior who would not be born for more than two thousand years after he died. Abraham was saved by grace.

Paul says, **“He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.”** God has done a miracle. He has adopted us into his chosen people. God took people who were dead in sin, and in our baptisms he washed our sins away. He made us alive in Christ. He promises that one day we will rise from the dead. He is the God who gives life to the dead. God took people like us – Gentiles, rebels, beggars, people who were nothing in God’s eyes, people who God didn’t even consider to be a real people – and he made us into the new Israel. He calls things that are not as though they are.

God doesn’t ask us to earn our way to heaven. He tells us that Jesus has won heaven for us already. He tells us that Jesus died and paid for all the sins of all the world. No one is left out. You never have to worry if God’s grace counts for you because his heart is so big and his favor is so vast that there is no sin you or I can commit that Jesus didn’t pay for. And then, by the miracle of grace, God turns his heart to each one of us individually and he reaches into our hearts through that gospel and he gives us faith. Faith is not a work we do. It’s trust in Jesus and even that trust is gift of our Father’s love. That makes us his new people. Just like Old Testament Israel, God has a home for us. We are traveling through the wilderness of this life on our way to the Promised Land.

Only the people of God will reach heaven. So God came to us in the gospel and he adopted us into that people. I once heard a pastor preach a sermon in which he asked, “How many of you grew up thinking you were Jewish?” What a strange question. But he raised his hand. His father was a pastor and he grew up hearing all these Old Testament stories and he thought that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, David and Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were all his forefathers, just like we think of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson as our forefathers. And you know what? Spiritually speaking, that child was 100% correct. We are the true people of God. By his grace, we will reach heaven. Can there be any doubt that that grace matters? It is the heart of all we believe and all our church does. It is God’s gift and promise and favor. It is ours. Amen.