

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

⁴ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. ...¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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)

Do Good People Go to Heaven?

Are you a good person? I would be surprised if anybody in here said “No.” By human standards we are good people. We love our spouses. We take care of our children. Most of us are the kind of people who blow out the driveways of elderly neighbors and visit sick relatives and listen when friends are wrestling with problems. And we come to church. We bring an offering to the Lord. We make sacrifices so our kids can attend a Lutheran elementary school or high school. By most standards that people today would apply, we’re good people. What benefit do we expect to get out of that? Should God show special favor to good people? Can we assume that our businesses will thrive and our kids will turn out OK and our relationships will be satisfying? Does God reward us for being “good”? And if he does, what does that say about the greatest problem of life: its ending? Simply put, **do good people go to heaven?**

I.

The obvious answer to that question is “yes.” But it isn’t as simple as that. What makes a person good? Do they have to come to church regularly to be good? Do they have to be good parents and good spouses and faithful employees? I’ve often read in newspapers about people who were convicted of crimes, and their mothers said they’re good people. In our society, the definition of “good” is a moving target. There’re a few things we universally condemn – child abuse, racism, stuff like that – but we don’t really demand very much. Most people think they’re good. Most people I talk to tell me that God should let them into heaven because they’ve tried their best and in the popular mind, trying your best equals being good.

But God has a standard. He demands much more than what passes for good in America today. God compares us to himself. St. Paul addresses that this morning by talking about a man that most Christians would call good: Abraham. Abraham left his home and went to live in a country he had never seen before, just because God told him to. Abraham then let his nephew Lot choose the better part of the new land to graze his flocks. When Lot’s choice got him in trouble and he was captured by a foreign king along with a large number of other people, Abraham chased them down and rescued them. Abraham submitted to the rite of circumcision not when he was a baby, but as a full grown man, again because God told him to. And perhaps his greatest good work of all, after waiting twenty-five years for God to give him a son, when God told him to sacrifice that son, Abraham bound him, laid him on an altar, pulled out his knife and would’ve killed him if God hadn’t stopped him.

Abraham was more than just a good person. He was a hero of faith. St. Paul says, **“If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.”** If doing all those things earned him heaven – if they justified him, that is, if they declared him innocent and righteous, then Abraham could boast to us at least about what he had done. But Abraham had not earned eternal life. Paul goes on, **“What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”** Abraham didn’t depend on his efforts to get to heaven. Instead, he believed God’s promises and God credited his faith to him as righteousness. Not his works, but his faith.

Just to make sure we understand the point, Paul talks about wages. The money you earn at your job is not a gift. If I punch in and do the job I'm hired to do, my boss owes me a paycheck. And if he doesn't give it to me, then I'm likely to sue him. If our goodness earned us heaven, then God would owe us eternal life. And many people think that he does. But Paul says, **"...to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."** Notice who God declares righteous: the wicked. That's a really harsh word. We don't use it much in colloquial English any more – it's been relegated to the wicked witch of the West and wicked stepmothers. The Greek word means "godless." It means people who have no regard for God. That is who God declares holy and righteous and innocent.

Abraham, who sacrificed his son and did all those other things, trusted in God who declares that godless, sinful people are righteous and holy in his sight. He needed to trust in God's declaration because he couldn't earn eternal life. If Abraham needed to trust in God, we do too. In God's sight, we are not good people. No matter how highly our mothers think of us, when God searches our hearts, he always finds sin there. Sin ruins and corrupts everything we are. Even the offerings we bring to church, even the hymns we sing here, even the sacrifices we make for our families are all ruined by sin. If we think that those things make us good enough to get into heaven, well, my friends, then we're telling God that we have eternal life coming to us. We're demanding that he pay us what he owes us.

If we do that, then my friends, God will deal with us according to what we have earned. On Judgment Day, he'll play back every sinful word that we've spoken and every sinful thought that ever passed through our minds and every lust we ever felt and every selfish and godless action we ever did. And he'll have a lifetime of words and actions and thoughts and feelings to play through. We were born sinners and sin corrupts us through and through. God will call us sinners and condemn us to hell forever. We may protest, "But I'm a good person!" But God's verdict will be different.

That's why faith is so important. Abraham was a sinner, but God declared him righteous. God justified him. Not because of his works but because of his faith. We have the same benefit. Faith is not a choice we make. It's not a work we do. Faith is not an action or an attitude or even a personal relationship with God. Faith is trusting what God promises. If I fly out to visit my parents in California and they promise to pick me up at the airport, is trusting that promise a decision or a work I do? No. I simply hear the promise and I know it's true. I do a whole series of actions because I trust the promise – I walk past the rental car vendors and gather my luggage and my family by the exit and I wait there if they're late. But those actions are not the trust. Those actions come from the trust that already exists in my heart.

God has come to us sinners and made a promise: Jesus has paid for our sin. That's what Lent is all about. Jesus walked the long, hard road to the cross. He let sinners accuse him so that we can have peace. He let sinners mock him and torture him and humiliate him so that we can have God's love. He let sinners nail him to a cross and he let his own Father abandon him there and plunge him into the essence of hell itself, so we can see God in heaven. He died so that we will live. God promises us that Jesus did all those things. Faith is trusting the promise. Faith is knowing it's true.

Now, because I know it's true, I do all kinds of things. I come to church. I pray with my children. I honor my spouse. I give an offering to the Lord. I try to deal with my fellow men in love and compassion and forgiveness. But none of those things makes me good. None of them is my faith. I do those things because the Holy Spirit has placed faith in my heart. Because of that faith, God declares me righteous. My faith places me behind Jesus, so God only sees him when he looks at me. And God calls me holy and righteous and perfect. God promises me eternal life. My friends, **do good people go to heaven? Only if they trust in Jesus.**

II.

Without faith in Jesus, there's no such thing as a good person. No matter how nice or helpful or worthwhile our efforts are, if we don't do them out of faith in Jesus, they don't count as good works, not even when they are things God commands, like giving an offering or loving our children. Does that bother you? It's our nature to want to get credit for the work we put in. If you worked long and hard on a project at work and your boss dismissed it as worthless, you might just quit. God does want us to do good works. God is pleased when we put our faith into practice and do the things he wants. But we cannot treat our efforts as if they earn us something. Eternal life is gift of God.

Paul goes back to Abraham again. He says, **"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.” Two thousand years before Jesus was born, God promised Abraham that through his offspring, all nations on earth would be blessed. That was a promise about Jesus. Jesus is a descendant of Abraham and his life and death and resurrection are the greatest blessing of all of history. That work of Christ is what Paul means when he says that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world. Paul wants us to think about being an heir. An inheritance is a gift, usually, a gift of love. If a will gives a million dollars to a person’s son, the executor can’t say, “Well, I don’t think this young man deserves this money. He’s going to have to clean up his act before I give it to him.” He cannot require work and effort. The will made a gift.

God made Abraham his heir. He gave him a gift. And God did the same thing for the rest of us. He gave us a gift that became ours as soon as his Son died. Paul says, **“For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless ...”** If we can somehow earn eternal life by our effort, then faith and the gospel are worthless because the gospel says God gave us a gift. Paul goes on to say, **“Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace ...”** Only when we trust what God says do we have a promise that is kept. That’s the only way to live by grace. The word grace means a gift. A number of years ago, my parents gave us a very expensive gift. They took our whole family to Europe for three weeks. They paid for the plane tickets. They even rented an apartment for us there. Now, how would they have felt if I would’ve said they owed me that trip to Europe? God has given us a gift. We cannot claim to have earned it.

But the church on earth is full of people who try to turn that gift into something that we do or earn. The Roman Catholic Church does not teach that we are righteous by grace through faith. In fact, it teaches that if you believe what I just said, you are eternally condemned. It teaches that we have to pay certain penalties for our sins in this life and if we don’t get it done here, we’ll have to pay after we die in purgatory before we can go to heaven. The Catholic Church is not alone in forcing works into the equation. Anyone who tells you to make a decision for Christ is telling you to depend on something you have done. On a more subtle level, all those big megachurches that make church only about practical things, that give you “how to” seminars and talk about improving your life, in the end, do the same thing because they are not emphasizing what Christ has done for us. They are only talking about what we do. People always wind up thinking that they’re going to heaven because they give a tithe or because they participated in forty days of purpose or because they went to seminars and workshops and read all these books.

None of that is what God has done. God has given us a gift. He has made us a promise. Faith is merely trusting that promise. That is the only way to heaven. Paul says that Abraham is the father of us all. In God’s eyes, Israel is not an ethnic group. Israel is the people of faith. It’s everyone who trusts in God’s promise. All of us who have faith in the grace of God are now a part of the true Israel of God. In Christ, God has made you his. He has declared that you are righteous. He has given you a gift that you could never earn or deserve. That gift is eternal life. **Do good people go to heaven? Only if they depend on God’s grace.**

Are you a good person? Many people who know you would say you are. But the only way that God would say that we are good people is when he looks at Christ instead of looking at us. That’s the gift he gave us. Faith means we trust his promise to see Jesus instead of us. Through that faith – which is itself a gift of God – we have eternal life. Amen.