

WHAT ABRAHAM TEACHES US ABOUT RIGHTEOUSNESS

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

Last week in our study on the concept of righteousness, I used two illustrations to show the impossibility of us “cleaning up our own lives” and becoming **as perfect as God** in order to gain entrance into heaven. The first had to do with getting our siding spotlessly white in order to win the “White as Snow” church building competition. To win, we would have to do two things:

- 1) Remove every speck of dirt that is on the building **now**; and
- 2) Take measures to ensure **no** dirt gets on it in the **future**. The reality is that no matter how hard we scrubbed the existing dirt, there would still be some stains—even if we used a power washer! Then, if we were to get 99% of the current dirt off, how could we possibly ensure that not even *one speck* of dirt would ever get on it again? The best flower gardens in the world—regardless if there were flowers, grass, stone, or wood chips in them—would still not prevent dirt from splattering up on the building!

The second illustration was that of a white robe that is given to you in a box. Trying to keep it perfectly white would be difficult at best, but to have all our past sins show up on the robe as black spots—and then be required to remove them without leaving a stain—would be humanly impossible!

The point I was making in both illustrations was this—it is **impossible** for us to “clean up” and get rid of our past sins and it is **impossible** to keep ourselves from sinning in the future. And yet, that is God’s requirement for entrance into heaven—be as holy and as perfect and as sinless as God is with no evidence of past sins and no adding of new ones! Why? Because God and sin don’t mix; God can’t dwell where sin is. Notice a couple of verses from last week:

Habakkuk 1:13 “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity:”

Revelation 21:27 “And there shall in **no wise** enter into it **any thing** that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or **maketh a lie**: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.”

To recap, man’s predicament is two-fold:

- 1) Man is sinful and cannot get rid of his sin
- 2) God is holy and does not let sin into heaven. Not good news, is it? To call it bad news is a gross understatement, though, because in reality it is **horrible** news. Notice the judgment referred to in...
Matthew 25:41 “...Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:”
II Thess 1:8-9 “In **flaming fire taking vengeance on them** that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: **who shall be punished with everlasting destruction** from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power;”
Eph 2:12 “...having no hope, and without God in the world.”

God does not leave us totally hopeless, however, because there is **good** news that goes along with the bad. The good news is not dependent on what we do—it is dependent upon what God did. And God in His love provides a way for us to be considered “sin-free”—our past sins *gone* and our future sins *not counted* against us. How can He do that? By removing the sin debt that we owe and crediting to us the righteousness—the perfectness—of Christ. One of the most in-depth teaching on imputed righteousness—I’ll explain imputed more in a little bit—is Paul’s teaching on how Abraham was counted as being righteous.

Please turn to Romans 4 and follow along as I read verses 1-5. Notice again verse 1. It is interesting that Paul starts his teaching on Abraham with a question and the question is this: What can we learn from our ancestor Abraham regarding the *flesh*? Kind of a strange question, isn’t it? The key to understanding the question—and the answers that Paul gives—is to understand what he means by “flesh.”

We know from the context that he is not referring to his literal skin or the flesh/meat under the skin. How do we know that? Because the way he begins to answer the question has nothing to do with flesh and blood! It does, however—according to verse 2—have to do with being **justified** in God’s sight by **works**. The question, then, is this: ‘What can we learn from Abraham regarding his works and being right in God’s sight?’

We also see that in chapter 3. In verse 20, Paul says “by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified...” Stated another way, ‘works do not save.’ He then presents an argument in verses 21-27 and wraps up the argument in verse 28 “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.” In other words, a man is saved by faith—not by works. And then he brings up Abraham as an example of someone who was righteous in God’s sight and asks ‘what can we learn from Abraham regarding his works?’ Abraham teaches us two things.

1. The Imperfection of Works (vs 2, 4)

A. Works lead to boasting by people (v 2)

v 2: “For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God.”

In other words, if Abraham was declared righteous based on what he **did**, he could glory/brag/boast. There are a number of reasons God is against boasting, though.

First, **i. Boasting conflicts with the nature of God**

If Abraham were justified by works, he could boast. He could brag in heaven about his accomplishments to others that were there with him. God has a problem with boasting though, doesn’t He?

Isaiah 42:8 “I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.”

ii. Boasting is contrary to nature of heaven

Heaven is about **Jesus** and what He did on the cross—not about what we did on earth.

Revelation 5:12 “Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.”

Eph 2:9 “Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

“If we could work our way to heaven, there would be bragging in heaven. And if there is bragging in heaven, heaven ceases to be heaven!”

iii. Boasting ceases when compared to God

Abraham would be able to have the applause of men in heaven, but would not have the applause of God. Why? Because there is no comparison to Abraham’s attempts at goodness and God’s actual goodness.

Rom 3:23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;”

I Cor 1:29 “That no flesh should glory [boast] in His presence.”

B. Works lead to indebtedness of God (v 4)

“Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.” If you work and are given wages for that work, it is not a gift. Your employer is not being gracious and kind and thoughtful if he pays you what he owes you on pay day. Why? Because he *owes* it to you; he is indebted to you.

If you can work your way to heaven, God would not be gracious in allowing you in—He would be giving you what you had **earned**. In other words, He would be indebted to you. Is God indebted to *anyone*? Is God obligated to do anything for anyone?

i. God being indebted to us is contrary to His character

Who is God? God is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords; He is the first and last; the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. There is no one—no being—greater than He.

Isaiah 43:13 “Yea, before the day was I am He; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand: I will work, and who shall let it?”

Isaiah 46:10 “Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:”

He is not—and never can be—indebted to us, but we most certainly are indebted to Him.

ii. God being indebted to us is contrary to our condition

He is the Creator; we are the created. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. He is our God, meaning we are indebted to Him and not Him to us.

What do we learn from Abraham? First, we learn the imperfection of works. Next let’s notice...

2. The Imputation of Righteousness

Notice the last half of verse 6 “...unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works,”

Verse 8 “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.”

Verse 11 (end) “...that righteousness might be imputed unto them also:”

Not surprisingly, **impute** in all 3 of these verses come from the same Greek word: *logizomai*.

What is surprising, though, is that this Greek word shows up 5 more times in this passage for a total of 8!

--It is translated “count” in verses 3 and 5; “reckoned” in verses 4, 9, and 10

When the same Greek word shows up 8 times in 11 verses, God is most certainly wanting us to notice and grasp the significance of it! So what does impute mean?

It means to attribute/reckon/credit/or ascribe something to someone.

Using these words, let’s look at these 3 verses again.

--v 6 “unto whom God **ascribes** righteousness without works”

--v 8 “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not **attribute** sin.”

--v 11 “...that righteousness might be **credited** unto them also:”

Trying to use the word itself, this might be even a simpler way to think of it: something is “imputed” when it is “putted” on our account or “imported” onto our account.

Another word that shows up often in these same 11 verses is the word “righteous” or “righteousness” which show up 7 times. The main point of this passage is that righteousness—the payment and removal of all past, present, and future sins—was ascribed/attributed/credited/reckoned to Abraham and David—and can also be ascribed to us.

How do we get righteousness—God’s perfectness—credited to our account? We already saw that it doesn’t happen *because of works*, but Paul makes sure we are clear on that by repeating that thought again.

A. Proclaimed as being apart from works (v 6)

--v 6 “Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God **imputeth righteousness without works**,” God’s righteousness—His white robe of perfection—is credited to our account without works. It is not about what we do—but it is about what God did! Notice it doesn’t happen all by itself, though. We don’t automatically have God’s righteousness credited to us. It is...

B. Procured by faith (v 3, 5, 9, 11)

--v 3 “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.” Abraham believed what God said and because of that, God credited righteousness to his account.

--v 5 “...his faith is counted for righteousness.” Faith gets righteousness credited to our account.

--v 9 “...faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness.”

--v 11 “...a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised...”

Aren't you glad it is *faith*—and not works—that gets righteousness credited to our account? Because it is faith and not works, the ungodly can get into Heaven. Verse 5 says that God can justify—declare righteous—the ungodly. The rich and the poor—and everyone in between—can have God's righteousness because it is obtained by **faith**. Man and woman; young and old; black and white; jailed or free; Jew or Gentile—anyone and everyone—can have God's righteousness ascribed to them because God is the one who does the "crediting" and it is obtained through faith.

Imputation of righteousness—God's crediting to our account a clean slate—is pronounced as being apart from works and is procured by faith. Lastly, it....

C. Produces joy in the recipients of righteousness (vs 6-8)

Working your way to heaven can **never** bring joy. Why? Because you will never have assurance that you've done enough because God won't give you that assurance! Notice verse 6-8. The word "blessed" in both 7 and 8 means "happy"—"'Happy' are they whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered. 'Happy' is the man to whom the Lord will not impute [ascribe/reckon/count] sin."

Who declared that there is happiness in being forgiven and not having our sins charged against us? Paul wrote these words, but he quoted David's words in Psalm 32. When did David write Psalm 32? Many scholars believe that Psalm 32 was written after David's sin with Bathsheba. Consider this:

David committed adultery with Uriah's wife and she became pregnant. David tried to cover up his affair by calling Uriah home from the battle to spend some time with his wife. Uriah refused to sleep at home, however, and instead slept at the king's house with the king's servants. So David sent Uriah back to the battle with a letter to general Joab. Here's what the letter that Uriah carried said: "Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die" (II Sam 11:15).

Let that sink in: David committed adultery and tried to cover it up with deception, but when that failed, he put a faithful, noble warrior in the front of the battle and had the rest of the men pull back so that man—Uriah—would be killed. If that wasn't bad enough, he then took Bathsheba to be his wife. II Samuel 11:27 says "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord."

Can God forgive all of that? Yes, He can—and yes, He did! How can God do that? Because David confessed his sin. **Psalm 32:5** "I acknowledge my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and **thou forgavest** the iniquity of my sin. Selah."

David confessed, God forgave, and David felt the joy of being forgiven. Aren't you glad that the knowledge and joy of David's forgiveness didn't die with David? Here's what I'm getting at: God had it recorded in His word so that we, too, could know that our sin—even horrendous sin like David's—**could be** forgiven and we could know it is forgiven and feel the joy of that forgiveness!

How can we be forgiven—and know we are forgiven? Notice again the end of verse 6 "God imputeth righteousness without works." This verse sums up the two things stressed in the verses we looked at. First, it is not of works. Second, it is something God does—God is the one that ascribes to us a clean slate where are past, present, and future sins are not counted against us.

How and when does He do that? When we come to Him in simple faith and ask Jesus Christ to forgive us and save us. Have you done that?

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS:

1. First and foremost, are you forgiven? God has a record of your sins. Are they still being charged to your account—or is God's righteousness credited to your account instead? What a wonderful exchange—Jesus take our sin and pays the penalty, then God credits to us the perfectness of Jesus.
2. Child of God, are you joyful because you are forgiven and heaven-bound? Of all the people that should be happy, shouldn't it be us---those that a blood-bought and forgiven and certain of heaven?
3. Are you sharing that joy with others?