

By Grace, Through Faith

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[0:00] You may be seated. Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm one of the pastors here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's word to you today.

I have been telling you for four or five months now that we are heading back into the book of Romans. And in fact, this morning, we are back in the book of Romans.

So I'm going to invite you to turn with me there now, Romans chapter 4. And I'll remind you that the book of Romans is a letter written by the Apostle Paul in the 50s A.D.

It is called Romans for a very simple reason, which is that the Apostle Paul wrote it to the churches in the city of Rome. And it is about the good news of the gospel, the news of Jesus' death and his resurrection.

I want to call your attention to page 7 of your worship guide, where you'll see this quite bold quote, bold claim. Paul's letter to the Romans is arguably the single most important piece of literature in the history of the world.

[1:11] And I tell you that to ask you to sit up and take notice. There may be few things that are more important this week than learning what Paul has to tell us in this letter.

So we want to learn more. We want to learn more about Romans, about this book. This passage that's before us this morning teaches us some of the fundamentals of human nature.

It's about what we've already talked about in our confession of faith, which is the concept of justification. And so with that, I invite you to turn with me. Romans chapter 4.

You can turn in your Bible. It's on page 7 of your worship guide. And I want to remind you that this is God's word. Jeremiah chapter 23 tells us that God's word is like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces, which means that there is nothing so powerful that it can stand against God's word.

And so that's why we read now Romans chapter 4, starting at verse 1. What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather, according to the flesh?

[2:32] For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say?

Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Our Father in heaven, we praise you again that you do speak to us through your word. We ask that we would not take that for granted, that we would continue to marvel at it, to delight in it.

We ask that you would honor your promises this morning. We would honor your promise in Isaiah chapter 55, that your word does not return to you void, but it accomplishes your purposes.

So we ask that you would accomplish great things in our lives, our hearts, and our minds, as we turn to this great letter that is also the very words of God.

[3:39] We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Samsonite, the luggage company, was started in Denver in 1910, and very shortly after they were started, they began their advertisements based around this idea of a stress test.

So in the 1910s, one of their first advertisements showed a Samsonite suitcase, and it was opened up, and then on top of the cover there was a board, and standing on top of the board were four full-grown men.

Which is to say, look how strong our suitcase is. If you fast forward to 1976, they ran a TV commercial where the Samsonite suitcase was stress tested by an elephant.

You can find this on YouTube. And as it starts, printed on the screen, it says, the Samsonite suitcase used in this film was not reinforced in any way for the purpose.

And then we get to watch this elephant. He takes the suitcase, he drags it with his trunk, he kicks it with his legs. But you think, well, it can be dragged and kicked. Then the elephant steps on it.

[4:56] After he steps on it, he sits on it. And then the elephant takes it in his trunk, and he throws it up in the air. The advertisement ends by saying this, Samsonite, the strength you need to travel.

Our luggage can hold up under an elephant, which means it can hold up under anything.

Here, the beginning of chapter 4 of Romans, Paul is stress testing everything he taught in chapters 1 through 3.

Can what Paul just taught hold up under the test of Abraham? Now, I say that, and you might be thinking, well, what did Paul teach in Romans chapters 1 through 3?

We haven't looked at it in 9 or 10 months. In Romans chapters 1 through 3, Paul is working to make one point. And the one point he's working to make is this, everyone deserves God's wrath.

[6:10] Chapter 1 of Romans, he makes the argument that Gentiles, that is non-Jews, non-religious people, deserve God's wrath. Then in chapter 2, he sets his focus, his lens, on Jews, religious people.

And he says, you know what, it's not just Gentiles. Jews also deserve God's wrath. Then in chapter 3, he proceeds to sum up his argument and tie together the loose ends.

The summary comes in Romans chapter 3, verse 23, which says this, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

That's Romans chapters 1 through 3. Of course, we don't want to forget the next verse. He doesn't just say everyone deserves God's wrath. Verse 24, and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ.

So everyone deserves God's wrath. There is a way out. The only way out is through faith in Jesus Christ. Okay, Paul, let's see if your theory holds up for Abraham.

[7:27] Because to the Jews, if anyone was saved by works, if there was anyone who did not need God's grace, it was Abraham himself.

And this might not make sense to you. As we've looked at Abraham over the last four or five months, we've seen his failures, right? We've seen the places where Abraham fell short. But if you were a Jew living in the first century, Abraham might as well be George Washington to Americans.

I cannot tell a lie. Abraham might as well be Mary to the Roman Catholics, right? Practically sinless.

Maybe your suitcase works most of the time, but can it stand up under an elephant? Maybe most people deserve God's wrath.

Maybe most people need to receive God's grace as a gift. What about Abraham, though? What about Abraham? That's the question of verse 1. What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather, according to the flesh?

[8 : 42] Now this phrase, the flesh, can be confusing because it means different things in different places in Scripture. And so you can't just know one meaning and apply it across the board.

You have to know how Paul is using it in each instance. Paul uses it in at least two or three different ways. We're not going to go into all of those this morning. I'll simply tell you that here, when he's talking about the flesh, Paul is talking about your resume or your accomplishments.

When he says the flesh, he is saying the good things that you have done in this life. What was gained by Abraham, then, according to all the great things he did?

What was gained by Abraham because of what he did in chapter 22, when he bound Isaac when God told him? What was gained by Abraham for making sure his son Isaac married someone from his own people?

Verse 2 confirms this for us, clarifies that flesh here goes along with justified by works. Now justified is another word we need to make sure we're crystal clear on.

[9 : 59] We already talked about it this morning in our confession of faith. To be justified means that you have right standing before God. If you are justified, your life is free of sin and it is full of righteousness.

So remember what we confessed this morning. With justification, we talked about how we become innocent before God. I told you about the double imputation, the two givings.

We give our sin to Jesus. Jesus gives his righteousness to us. There are two declarations. God declares us innocent and he declares us righteous.

That's the basics of the gospel. Very basics of the gospel means that we begin with the bad news, which is that humanity has been called to worship, love, follow, serve, and obey God.

But we fail in that every single day in every way. So as we talk about justification, we need to know what it is. It's those two declarations.

[11 : 10] Declared innocent, declared righteous. We also need to be clear that in and of ourselves, we are in fact not justified. We are not innocent, not righteous.

Come back with me to verse 2. Therefore, it means if Abraham is justified by his works, not by Jesus' death, but by his resume, then he can boast.

If Abraham is good because of his resume, then he can brag, then he's good, then he's covered. But verse 2 tells us at the end, but not before God.

Now this is confusing if you just read it on the surface level, because it can sound like, you know what? Abraham can boast before whoever he wants to boast before. As long as he doesn't boast in front of God.

As long as he's boasting to other people, he's fine. That's actually not what this passage is saying. When it says, but not before God, it's saying the hypothetical is false. Okay, if Abraham was justified by works, but not before God, meaning no, actually he wasn't.

[12 : 19] The hypothetical if is false. If Abraham is innocent before God because of his resume, then he can boast, but he isn't, so he can't.

Even Abraham needs God's grace. Does Abraham disprove chapters 1 through 3 of Romans?

No. How do we know? How do we know that Abraham, this super example of God's people, is just like the rest of us?

Well, that takes us to verse 3, which tells us righteousness comes by faith. And here he quotes Genesis chapter 15.

Scott already read for us this morning when he says, For what does the scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

[13:30] Counted here is that declaration that we're talking about. When it's counted, it means that God declared him to have a status. We talked already about those two declarations, those two statuses.

Both innocent and righteous. And so the point is this. Abraham's righteousness did not come by works.

Abraham's righteousness came by belief. Abraham's righteousness did not come by what he did. Abraham's righteousness came by faith.

Now, it's easy at this point for us to still mess this up because some people will say, Oh, well, Abraham still did do something. Abraham believed.

That belief is a type of work then. And so we can still look to Abraham as some kind of example. The problem is this. Faith is the instrument of justification.

[14:37] It is the means by which justification comes. It is not the basis or the foundation of justification. Faith is a means or an instrument.

It is not the grounds or the basis. In our confession of faith this morning, we said justification is received by faith alone. We did not say justification is earned by faith alone.

It's received by faith alone, not earned by faith alone. Charles Spurgeon, a famous Baptist preacher in the 1800s, explained it this way.

He said, Faith is the pipe and grace is the water. It's just an instrument. It's just a means. The pipe is merely the means by which the water flows.

The water is merely received by the pipe. Abraham's righteousness merely received by faith. Is it true that everyone deserves God's wrath?

[15:49] Is it true that everyone must receive God's grace as a gift? Yes.

And it's so true that it's even true of Abraham. That's how true it is. Even Abraham had to receive God's mercy and grace by faith.

Now, I told you earlier, Romans is the most important work of literature in the history of the world.

And now I'm going to tell you why. Romans is the most important piece of literature in the history of the world because it tells us things that are fundamental and universal to human nature.

It tells us about the human nature, human experience. And what justification tells us about the human experience is this. The human heart has a burning desire to be right.

[17:06] The human heart has a burning desire to be right. The human heart has this burning desire to justify its right to exist, to be enough, to be good.

Even wicked people are trying to be good by their own definition. I told you before that when I was a college student, I was part of our college ministry of our denomination of RUF.

And in my junior year, there were some major conflicts within that ministry. And I ended up sort of being collateral damage for two of them. And I met at one point with my campus pastor, my version of Jonathan Clark, you know, 15, 16 years ago.

And he was trying to work with the people involved for some repentance and reconciliation. And I was sort of involved in the outside of all of it. And he said this to me, which I'll never forget. He said, I have never met a force more powerful than a person's need to be right.

Never met a force more powerful than a person's need to be right. He was saying that because he was in the middle of conflict, right? And he was trying to convince people to admit where they had failed and fallen short.

[18:31] If you have been a Christian for a while, everything I told you at the beginning, you've already heard. You already know about justification.

You've heard that word before. Or, you know, you might be tempted as you're listening to think, man, I'm so glad we have this review. Because I'm sure there are other people who need to hear this.

Now, I want to tell you, if you're ever in the Bible and you think that to yourself, you are in a really dangerous place spiritually. Anytime we think, man, I'm so glad other people can learn this truth from the Bible.

Because the reality is we're always digging deeper, looking and examining our own hearts. Do you have a hard time admitting that you're wrong?

Is criticism extremely painful for you?

[19:37] And does it make you feel at times like you're going to crumble? Do you find that you often or maybe even constantly are defending yourself?

Do you find yourself from time to time or maybe frequently comparing yourself to other people?

If, by the way, I would say all of those things are probably issues for all of us at some level.

If you truly and fully find your standing with Jesus Christ, not a single one of those will be an issue for you.

And if you find your standing with Jesus Christ, if you find your standing, your rightness fully in Jesus Christ, you will have no problem admitting that you're wrong.

[20:52] If you know that you're so bad that Jesus had to come die for you, and when you receive criticism, you'll say, of course.

It's actually worse than you think. You think I'm, you know, this bad. I'm actually a lot worse. You don't even know how bad it is. And I can say that because my standing actually is based on Jesus' life.

I'm not justified in the flesh. Those aren't things I'm leaning on. I'm leaning on Jesus' death and resurrection. Since that's my footing, my grounding, my foundation, anything you have to say to me actually can't wipe that out.

There's nothing that can remove that. Romans doesn't just tell us about the desperate need of the human heart to be right.

also tells us of our desperate struggle working to be right. Because what do we do in our lives if we're not trying to prove that we are worthy and worth it, that we're a good person?

[22:08] Whether it's our romance, our accomplishments, our lifestyle, our wealth, our education, our social class. I'm a good person because I belong to the right political party. I'm not crazy like those people on the other side.

I'm okay because I'm educated and accomplished and disciplined. I'm okay because I know what matters in life unlike those other people who are so distracted. I'm okay because I'm a good Christian who comes to church every single Sunday.

I'm okay because I'm pretty attractive and I have great style. I'm okay because I'm really funny and people like me. I'm okay because I've never been divorced.

I'm okay because I've never declared bankruptcy. I'm okay because we're not like those other couples. We've never had to go to counseling.

By the way, if you've ever said that or thought that, it's probably a good sign that you're overdue to be in counseling. Find this on the back of your worship guide.

- [23 : 13] We can scarcely conceive of ourselves any more apart from our doing or what Christians call works. We construct ladders out of whatever materials we have at hand, shoddy or not, and erect scoreboards where they do not belong.

Everyone has a law. They're trying to observe a scoreboard. They're trying to rack up, which takes us right back to Romans chapter 2, the very beginning.

Paul makes this point. Look, whatever standard you have, you can't live up to your own standard. Everyone in this world is a hypocrite.

Even, let's say, for the sake of argument, you're on the right team. You're still not living up to what that team is about. So whether you've been a Christian your entire life, or you're just asking questions about Christianity at this point, the question of this passage is this.

Where do you look for your worth in this world? Where do you look for your worth in this world?

- [24 : 49] What thing, if you lost it, would you say, it is all over? Christian, there is only one sure and stable place to look, and it is this, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is Jesus' death that takes the penalty for our sins. His resurrection, reminding us that he has conquered death and his life is credited to us.

That is the place and the only place you will find freedom and joy. That is where the treadmill ends and rest begins.

If you have a good memory, you may remember last year, I told you many times, the book of Romans is often called the fifth gospel.

And it's often called the fifth gospel because whatever Paul teaches, Jesus taught first. Jesus taught this same thing in Matthew chapter 11.

- [26 : 13] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Look to Jesus for your worth in this world.

It's the only easy yoke and the only light burden. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we thank you that you don't meet us with a longer to-do list.

You don't come to us to tell us to work harder or faster. Instead, you meet us with your mercy and your grace.

We ask that we would rest in and on that, that it would change us from the inside out, that we would be people filled with joy because we know we've been justified by you.

- [27 : 44] We ask all of these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I invite you to stand for our closing hymn.