

Founding Father

Romans 4:1-12

July 16, 2017

Introduction:

In our country there are few historical people we hold in as high regard as we do our country's Founding Fathers. Even though they've been gone now for over 200 years, every school kid learns stories about men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Paul Revere, and others who fought for our freedom against the British and set up the Republic that we enjoy today. We hold their ideals in high regard, such that most of us can probably recite from memory those opening lines of the Declaration of Independence that says, *"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."*

No less important to us is our country's Constitution and its amendments that lay out our system of government and our rights as citizens, such as freedom of religion, speech, the press, and assembly, to name just a few. Even today, there is still much discussion when speaking of laws as to the question of "What was the intention of the Founding Fathers?" Our country's Founding Fathers laid the bedrock foundation for our freedoms and our form of government and whenever questions arise about how to apply those ideals to issues facing us, we turn back to them and to understand what they meant by what they wrote.

In light of how we view the Founding Fathers of our country, it shouldn't surprise us that the Jews held Abraham, their Founding Father, up in very high esteem. The entire Jewish nation traced their heritage back to Abraham, and so for them, Abraham was their George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin all wrapped into one. It was his life and the promises God made to him that served as the cornerstone of what it meant to be Jewish. So then, if Paul's teaching about the gospel of salvation by grace through faith was to have any hopes of gaining traction in the minds of his Jewish readers, he needed to show he wasn't guilty of "revisionist history" that ignores or contradicts what was true of their Founding Father, Abraham.

So as we move on now in our study of Romans, Paul needs to demonstrate for his readers that his gospel isn't violating how God worked through Abraham. Paul needs to go back to the very beginning and show them that righteousness has always come by faith and not by works, and that this was indeed the case even for Abraham, their Founding Father. So then, let's take a look at what Paul has to say about Abraham by turning open your Bibles with me to Romans 4. Our passage this morning can be found on pg. 941 of the pew Bibles. We will be examining the first twelve verses of chapter 4, which I'll read through first, and then we'll circle back around and work our way through them in greater detail.

So please follow along as I read Romans 4:1-12. **"What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 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.'**

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

**‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;**

blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.’

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.”

This section divides easily into two main parts: the first half consists of v. 1-8 what Scripture says about how Abraham was justified and the second half, in v. 9-12, focus on the issue of circumcision in regard to Abraham. So let’s get right to it and begin with what Paul wants for us to see in the first eight verses and that is this...

1. Abraham was justified by faith

Paul knows at this point in his argument he’s going to face an objection from his Jewish readers concerning Abraham. It was a common viewpoint in Paul’s day (and is still widely held today) that Abraham was a righteous man and so it was thought that what made Abraham acceptable in God’s sight was his obedience to God. So then, Paul asks in v. 1, **“What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?”** Paul’s been speaking abstractly about how God justifies us by faith apart from works but now he’s going to illustrate the principle by using a real-life example. So he says in effect, “What about Abraham? Was he justified by faith or by works? Let’s go back to our Founding Father and see what we can discover.”

He raises the first possibility in v. 2. **“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about...”** Paul is imagining a situation where Abraham managed to do enough for God to be obligated to accept him. If that was the case, then Abraham would indeed have something to boast about. He could say, “I did it. I earned the favor of God. These were the things I needed to do and one after another I checked each of them off the list until finally I had accomplished everything God required of me.” If so, then Abraham would have every right to boast. He did what others had not. By his own wisdom and willpower, by his cunning and strength, by his determination and ambition, Abraham could brag that he totally nailed it. He could go and proudly hang up the “Mission Accomplished” banner over the front of his tent and celebrate his remarkable accomplishment. Abraham would indeed have something to boast about if he was justified in God’s sight on the basis of his works.

But notice now the end of v. 2. **“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.”** What does Paul mean by that last phrase? Does he mean Abraham could boast before men but not before God? Well no, because God is the absolute standard of righteousness and even Abraham fell short of the glory of God in terms of his obedience. What Paul means by this can, I think, be paraphrased like this, “If Abraham was indeed justified works, he would have something to boast of! But before God, such a thing is impossible because all have fallen short of God’s glory, including Abraham.” So Paul here is raising an impossible possibility. If anyone could be justified by works, it would mean great boasting for that individual, but once you measure yourself against the perfect righteousness of God, you quickly find that any hopes of boasting immediately withers away.

But rather than rest on logical deduction, Paul turns to what Scripture itself has to say in regard to Abraham. In v. 3 Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6. Look back at your Bibles. **“For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’”** Abraham was counted righteous because he **“believed God.”** Not because he obeyed God. Not because he was righteous by virtue of his own words and deeds. Not because Abraham tried his hardest to be a moral person. Not because he was really loving and kind and accepting to others. He was counted righteous because he believed. This verse is really the core of what Paul is trying to teach in this chapter. Scripture tells us why Abraham was counted righteous and it has nothing whatsoever to do with his works. At the very fountainhead of the Jewish nation, righteousness came not as a result of works but solely through faith. Abraham believed God and that - and that alone - was credited to him as righteousness.

This is Christianity is a nutshell. What brings about our justification in the sight of God is not our works but rather by faith in God’s promises. Abraham believed God’s promises to give him a son and an inheritance. We believe God’s promises that our sins will all be forgiven by Christ’s atoning sacrifice for us. Salvation has always been by faith and not by works. From Abraham all the way to today, we are declared righteous by faith and not by anything we’ve done. If you don’t get this singular, central truth, then you don’t get Christianity, and that’s not an overstatement. Christianity teaches that what makes us acceptable in God’s sight has absolutely nothing to do with anything in us: it comes about simply because of faith in God’s promises.

But perhaps one could object, “Well, isn’t faith itself a work?” Isn’t the act of believing by Abraham a work which he needed to do in order to meet God’s requirements?” The answer would be yes if faith was something we had to muster up ourselves. There are those who will claim that God makes salvation available to all, but the deciding factor of whether anyone is saved is whether they believe or not, which God does nothing to bring about: he simply responds to the faith they themselves conjure up. If true, that would indeed be a work because it would be based on human initiative. Instead, even faith itself is a gift of God. The reason anyone believes is because God first causes them to be born again so they can (and will) believe, and that work of regeneration is a gift of God given by grace. Therefore, faith is no less a gift of God than the cross is. Faith isn’t a work because it is not up to us to muster it up: God must give it to us and he does to all whom he has chosen to be born again by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, it must be added that while God credits us with positional righteousness, that change in position begins to manifest itself in practice. We become what we've been declared. I think of the character of Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*. He steals silverware from a kind priest who took him in, but when captured by the police and brought before the priest, the priest covers for him, saying he gave the silver to him as a gift. Jean Valjean is shocked at this incredible act of grace. Though he was guilty, the priest declared him righteous and set him free. This in turn radically changes Jean Valjean's life and he goes on to become a righteous man as a result of this one act of grace. That's a picture of what happens to us. We are guilty of sin, but God declares us righteous through faith in Christ. But then as a result we begin to truly be righteous in that our hearts are so transformed by God's amazing grace that we begin to become what we have been declared. Justification - the declaration of our righteous position before God - leads to sanctification - the practice of righteousness in our lives.

Now look back in your Bibles at v. 4. **“Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.”** When you receive your paycheck, do you think to yourself, “How nice of them to give this money to me. Wow, my boss is such a kind and generous man. This is such an unexpected surprise.” I'm betting dollars to donuts none of you think of your paycheck like that. That paycheck is not a gift: it's what is due to you for the work you rendered. You have an agreement with your employer that if you work he'll pay you a certain amount of money and that after a week or two he'll add up all those hours you worked and pay you the agreed amount for your labor. He's not being kind or generous to you when giving you your paycheck. He's only giving you what you earned.

So if salvation was by works, then we'd have no reason to talk about God's kindness or generosity because like an employer, he's just giving us what we earned. Furthermore, if salvation was by works, then we'd have reason to boast because it was earned by us. You worked hard and kept your end of the bargain and now God owes you your due.

But that's not how it is. Look at v. 5. **“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”** Salvation is not like a job when you earn your pay by what you do. It's more like this: your bank account is empty. Your debts have piled up with no hopes paying them off. The bank is about to foreclose on your home and repossess your car when in the mail you receive a letter informing you that the bank manager has decided to forgive all your debt and will deposit ten million dollars into your checking account. All you need to do is sign the letter and bring it back to the bank. In other words, you need to believe it's true by responding. Your account will be credited with ten million dollars not because you earned it in any way, but because it was given to you freely by an act of extreme generosity of another.

That's the nature of the gospel: God credits us with the righteousness of Christ not because we earned it but out of sheer grace. We need only believe the promises of God, a belief that itself is a gift of God given through the new birth. As a result, we like Abraham, have no grounds for boasting because our justification comes not by works that earned our salvation but as a gift by grace through faith in Christ.

Well, even though Paul's focus is on Abraham, he slyly slips in King David as a second witness to the truth of justification by faith apart from works. Look back at your Bibles now at v. 6-8. "... **just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.'**"

Paul quotes from Psalm 32 to show that David also teaches that God justifies the ungodly apart from works. David mentions those who have "**lawless deeds**" and "**sins**" (no doubt recalling his own transgressions). In other words, they clearly haven't earned God's favor by their deeds. But why are such people considered "**blessed**"? Because their lawless deeds have been forgiven, their sins have been covered and the Lord doesn't count his sin against him. God doesn't give them what they've earned; instead, he gives them grace by forgiving their sins by covering it with the blood of Christ. Therefore, justification by faith apart from works was not only true for Abraham, the Founding Father of the Jews, but it was also taught by David, the greatest king of the Jews. Paul's gospel therefore is not something new that stands in contradiction to the OT but rather it is the appointed fulfillment of what it pointed to all along.

But Paul is not done with Abraham yet - not by a long shot! After mentioning David, Paul returns to Abraham to show how the issue of circumcision demonstrates that justification is by faith and not by works such as circumcision. So our second point is...

2. Abraham was not justified by circumcision

Paul asks another question in v. 9. Look there with me. "**Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.**" Having established that justification by faith alone has been the case as far back as Abraham, the question is whether this is only true for the Jews - since Abraham was the Founding Father of the Jews - or if this true for Gentiles as well?

To answer this question, timing is everything. Look now at v. 10. "**How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.**" The passage Paul quoted previously about Abraham believing God and it was counted to him as righteousness is found in Genesis 15, but God's command that Abraham be circumcised doesn't come up until two chapters later, in Genesis 17. Between those two passages, 29 years have passed. So the fact that God counted Abraham's faith as righteous nearly three decades before he commanded him to be circumcised is significant. Let's continue reading to see why.

Please look back in your Bibles at v. 11-12. "**He (Abraham) received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.**"

The point then is circumcision had no connection to Abraham being declared righteous. God counted Abraham righteous long before any “law” was given. Thus, as one commentator put it,

“Circumcision, therefore, has no independent value. It cannot effect one’s entrance into the people of God; nor does it even ‘mark’ a person as belonging to God’s people apart from a prior justifying act. Abraham was declared righteous while still uncircumcised. His later circumcision added nothing materially to that transaction; it simply signified and confirmed it.” (Moo 269)

So then, Paul claims that Abraham is not only the forefather of the Jews but also of the Gentiles, not by physical descent or course, but by virtue of faith. He’s **“the father of all who believe without being circumcised”** - that is, Gentile Christians - and **“the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised”** - that is, they aren’t merely Jews by physical birthright - **“but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith”** of Abraham - that is, Jewish Christians.

I know this doesn’t sound startling to our ears, but Paul’s connecting of Gentile believers to Abraham by faith instead of by birth was utterly shocking. It was a source of nationalistic pride for a Jew to be physically related to their biological forefather Abraham, for it was after all to Abraham and his descendants that God made his promises. But Paul here opens it up and says those who have faith, regardless of their nationalistic identities, can consider Abraham to be their father. Abraham is the Founding Father not of Jews only but of all those who believe and have been justified by God through faith.

So then, even though the Jews attached a great deal of importance to circumcision, Paul dismisses it as irrelevant to whether one is right with God. Justification comes by faith and not by circumcision because Abraham is case in point of an individual who was declared righteous by faith long before he was ever circumcised. Circumcision, or any other work of the law, cannot make you right with God: the only thing that matters and has ever mattered is faith in God’s promises.

Now passages like this are a bit difficult to preach on because it can come across as splitting hairs about a matter that doesn’t seem to have any real relevance to us. Let’s face it, the timing of when Abraham was circumcised probably isn’t keeping you up at night in deep thought. But one area I do think a passage like this can be made more relevant to us is when we think about baptism. There are churches that act as if, or actually teach that, baptism is necessary to be saved. But if what Paul is saying about circumcision is true, then it would be no less true for baptism. Both were commanded by God and both serve as “markers” or “signs” of who is part of the covenant people of God. Yet, neither of them justifies anyone in God’s sight. You aren’t declared righteous in God’s sight because you were baptized any more than Abraham was because he was circumcised. God justifies sinners not because of obedience to any kind of law but purely by faith.

So let me encourage you to be baptized: Christ commanded it and it serves as a sign of what has already taken place. But that's the key: it points backwards. It shows us what did happen not what is happening by virtue of the act. Baptism points us to our dying and raising with Christ which took place when we first believed, before we were baptized. But the ritual of baptism doesn't save us any more than circumcision did for the Jews. Justification comes only by faith in Christ, given as a gift, not by any kind of works or merit, lest any man should boast. Baptism is an act of obedience that flows out of our salvation: it does not secure that salvation for us.

Conclusion

So then, as I draw this message to a close, we need to be reminded again and again that how we are justified before God has nothing to do with us. The only thing we contribute to our salvation is our sin which Christ took upon himself on the cross, to suffer God's wrath in our place. You bring nothing to the table by which you make yourself acceptable to God. There is no portfolio of good works that you can present at the Pearly Gates to gain your admission. No one will stand before God and use their good deeds as bartering chips or claim that God is indebted to them because of the good life they led. If God were to ask you after you die, "Why should I let you into heaven?" the only answer that will work is this: "Because of Christ. I'm a sinner who has only earned punishment, but I believe Christ suffered and died for me and that his righteousness is counted as if it were my righteousness through faith. My only hope and plea is Christ Jesus, my Savior who bled and died for me."

Salvation is now and has always been even during the life of Abraham, by grace, through faith, not by any works of our own, so that no man can boast. That is the central truth of Christianity and the confident hope of every believer. Let's pray.

Endnotes

Moo, Douglas. NICNT: The Epistle to the Romans. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co: Grand Rapids, 1996.