***March 5, 2023 Romans 4 1–5 13–17***

***The Gift of Grace***

**Scripture:**

*(1)What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? (2)For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. (3)For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (4)Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. (5)But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness… (13)For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. (14)If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. (15)For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. (16)For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, (17)as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")--in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Romans 4:1-17 NRSV*

**Notes:**

1. There is nothing we can do to earn the ***grace*** of God.
   1. The ***law*** didn’t exist when God called Abraham!
   2. God can bless whoever He ***chooses***.
   3. The emphasis is on Abraham’s ***faith*** in God.
   4. Circumcision was not the ***way***to justification.
2. Many of the stipulations were ***interpretations***of the law.
   1. What is the ***point*** of faith?
   2. Faith is the ***response*** of a person toward a gracious God.
3. It is easy for us to ***judge***.
   1. We ***judge*** those who don’t follow the way we believe.
   2. We ***judge*** ourselves harshly when we fail.
4. The entire message of Jesus is one of grace as a ***gift***.
   1. Christ’s sacrifice was for us in the midst of our ***sin***.
   2. Christ is a generous giver who extends grace to ***all***.
   3. ***Faith*** is our response to a good God who gives good gifts.
5. Righteousness begins with ***grace*** and our response of ***faith*** to that ***grace***.
   1. Grace is always a ***gift***.
   2. Breathe in the knowledge that God ***loves*** us.
   3. Breathe in the knowledge that God’s grace is ***sufficient***.

**Script:**

Have you ever felt that you had to earn a parent’s love? Let’s face it we all try to do things to please our parents. But for those of us who have become parents, the love we have for our children, does not have to be earned. In fact I will go as far as to say that one must work abundantly hard at making a parent not love them, and then there is no guarantee.

In the reflection for today in our book *Water for the Way*, Gabriel Benjiman, shares a story about a woman who approached him at church. She believed she became ill because she forgot to put her little green Bible under her pillow at night while she slept. We might feel it is easy to dismiss this behavior as silly or superstitious. We might even be tempted to moralize or criticize, about how we cannot *earn* God’s favor by what we do; but we should be careful to acknowledge the ways we also fall into this same trap. What little habits do you have; thinking if you don’t perform these tasks, you may fall from God’s grace or you may fall prey to sin.

We live in a transactional culture. Everything comes at a price. We work harder or produce more, in exchange for a higher salary, striving to receive higher favor, seeking to obtain better opportunities. Look at what children are taught about Santa Claus. Children are told they must go to sleep, they must not cry, they must not pout, they must behave, in order to get presents from Santa. The way we teach children about Santa is a reflection of the general way we live our lives in this world.

Not surprisingly, the people Paul is writing to in Romans have a similar problem. They view Abraham as someone who followed the law perfectly, they have him sitting high above everybody else on his pedestal. They believe Abraham did all the right things and he avoided all the wrong things and for this reason he was blessed by God as the father of nations, right? WRONG!!! But Paul corrects this thinking, saying that it wasn’t about what Abraham did. The free gift of God’s grace and mercy is what bestowed blessing on Abraham. Join me in the reading of God’s word today from Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

*(1)What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? (2)For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. (3)For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (4)Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. (5)But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness… (13)For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. (14)If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. (15)For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. (16)For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, (17)as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")--in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Romans 4:1-17 NRSV*

Paul’s correction is important for us too. Just like the culture of the world that says “work harder, produce more—or else,” we can begin to believe that God favors us based on what we do instead of based on the free gift of grace that God extends to us. This is especially important in this season of Lent, when we put spiritual practices and disciplines in place. We can mistake these disciplines that help form us to look more like Christ as something to earn God’s favor instead of tools to help us connect more deeply with God. But what we see here in Romans is that there is nothing we can do to earn the grace of God. It’s already available to all of us as a gift, if we only receive.

Paul points to Abraham in this text because there is a prevailing belief that Abraham followed the law perfectly. This (they thought) was why he was the father of nations: his descendants received favor before God because of Abraham’s blameless life. This was why he was also considered the forefather of the faith: he is the starting point of the nation of Israel, as the father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, and thus all the descendants thereafter.

The thinking of Paul’s audience is faulty for a few reasons. First and foremost, the law didn’t exist when God called Abraham! The law was not written until hundreds of years after Abraham’s life and death. It would have been impossible for him to follow what did not yet exist. Abraham himself was a gentile when he was called no one was Jewish because Judaism didn’t exist. Paul reminds his audience that God justifies the ungodly this means that God is sovereign and can bless whosoever God chooses. Further, the blessings are the gift of God, not the work of those who are blessed. Scripture says that “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” The emphasis is not on what Abraham did but on his faith in God.

Paul knows that his audience believes that Abraham must not have been considered justified, or righteous by God, until after he was circumcised; but Paul puts this assumption to rest as well. Circumcision was not the *way* to justification for Abraham; it was only a sign, a seal, a symbol, a way to illustrate to others Abraham’s righteousness before God. Much like Baptism is today in our church. An outward sign of inward grace. Paul emphasizes that righteousness isn’t just for Jews who follow the law, but that it is for gentiles as well. Abraham, as the father of many nations (not just the nation of Israel), is not restricted to bloodlines. He is a father of faith to all who follow in his footsteps.

The idea of Abraham as a perfect follower of faith led to legalism, a rigid adherence to the law. There was an idea seeping into the early church that Christians needed to follow every law of Torah perfectly. Gentile Christians were being left out of worship or told that they needed to be circumcised to participate in worship. Paul talks about this same conflict in more detail in Galatians, proving that it isn’t an isolated issue in one congregation. Remember that many of the stipulations surrounding adherence to the law were *interpretations* of the law. Especially in an oral tradition where people didn’t read, it was up to religious leaders to interpret what laws meant for the people. his practice would have continued in the early Christian church.

Fixating on the law leads to legalism and a concern with perfectionism. There are 613 individual laws that make up the Torah! Following each one perfectly to the letter was not possible. If salvation comes by following all 613 laws perfectly, then what is the point of faith? Faith is the response of a person toward a gracious God. It is the response to receiving the good gift of grace. If salvation comes by following all 613 laws perfectly, then no one can be saved. Everyone would be doomed, and the sacrifice of Christ would mean nothing.

It is easy for us to judge characters from the Bible, it is easy for us to judge those who were fixated on works, but we today often strive to earn favor with God. We judge those who don’t follow the way we believe they should. We judge ourselves harshly when we fail, continually living in shame cycles instead of trusting that God’s grace is enough, creating our own legalistic standards and then not forgiving ourselves when we don’t live up to them.

This is where grace comes into play. Transformation is a sign and seal of a person’s faith, not a precursor to it. In otherwards; you do not have to change who you are in order to be saved. But, by being saved and accepting the Lord, Jesus into your life, you will be changed because you are now following after Jesus and will begin to act according to His example. Transformation by grace can be compared to Abraham’s circumcision, which was an act that illustrated his faith, not one that earned him favor with God. The entire message of Jesus is one of grace as a gift. God didn’t come out of obligation but out of love, the incarnation itself is a declaration of God’s love. Christ’s sacrifice was for us in the midst of our sin. Christ didn’t wait for us to follow the law perfectly; he came in spite of our imperfection. Christ is not a cosmic Santa waiting for us to misbehave but a generous giver who extends grace to all of us. The only action that needs to happen on our part is to receive the gift. Faith is our response to a good God who gives good gifts.

The incarnation and the grace given to us in Christ are good news for those of us who aren’t part of the genetic lineage of Abraham. Grace is extended to everyone! All who are willing to receive it. A new family is being formed through grace, a family that does not depend on lineage or heritage.

The gift of grace is good news for people who are new to the faith. Righteousness begins with grace and with the response of faith to that grace. The moment of faith is when we become righteous, not by the works we do. But the works we do will be influenced by our faith and that same righteousness.

Even those who have grown up in faith communities can fall into the trap of thinking they need to earn God’s favor. Some of us who look put together on the outside struggle internally with these cycles of shame about our inadequacy. We fall into the trap of thinking that we will never be good enough to be considered part of the family of God. We fall int that trap that we do so much wrong that we would spend all of our time asking for forgiveness. Yet, we must remember that grace is always a gift. A gift given without restriction. Sometimes we even view the season of Lent, the season of fasting and repentance, as something we observe so God will love us more, instead of viewing it as an opportunity to grow in a deeper faith and understanding of that grace. It’s not about earning favor; it’s about meditating on the goodness of grace.

It’s important for us to remember the goodness of God and the immense gift that grace is. For those of us who are stuck in a shame cycle of not feeling good enough, it’s important to breathe in the knowledge that God loves us and *has* loved us, and that God’s grace is sufficient. It’s important for those of us who grew up in destructive systems of legalism to release those systems in light of the grace given to all of us. God’s grace is sufficient for all of us! It’s sufficient for the world too. God continues to extend grace to all. All any of us have to do to receive this gift is accept it.