

BaptistWay Bible Series for September 30: Faith is the way

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Faith is the way

- Romans 4:1-17, 23-25

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It is paramount to the Apostle Paul's proclamation that what had been promised "beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures" (1:2) is directly linked to the disclosure of righteousness based on faith. Paul continues to stress that righteousness is not defined by the Torah as a possession of the few. Rather, righteousness is sharing a faith like Abraham's that is available as a gift for many.



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Here, Paul uses the Genesis story about God's calling of Abraham and

creating a covenant with him to provide a framework for understanding this righteousness that comes by faith. God called “Abram” to leave his country, kindred and father’s house, and trust the One who promised to bless him and bless the world through him.

At the time, Abraham was childless. Yet God told him his descendants would be as countless as the stars. Abraham believed the Lord, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. His righteousness was not based on any of his good works or personal merits. There was no understanding of Abraham’s righteousness based on works under the law. How then, was Abraham considered righteous?

Regarding how Abraham came to be righteous, New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson explains that Abraham’s story provides the fundamental features of the ways humans relate to God. While he was still uncircumcised, God gave to Abraham a gift he did nothing to earn. The gift was God creating a covenant relationship with Abraham whereby he could be in a positive relationship to God by becoming the father of many nations. Certainly this was not Abraham’s idea. Such a relationship was original to God.

If it were not a gift original to God, Paul suggests our personal works would then be like a job where we earn wages by what we do. To earn our spiritual worth, we would need to produce proof of our righteousness. All manner of spiritual mischief would result, because then our works would be the sole reason for our righteousness. We could then claim bragging rights over against others who did not work as hard. Under this “ethic of earned credits,” we could draw dark, bold boundaries around people who threaten our sense of self-righteousness. What’s worse, we could pull the rank of race, nationality or economic status as a way to determine who God blesses and who God doesn’t bless. But surely we don’t do that, because righteousness is not relegated to such categories.

Paul writes to rupture such boundaries. Even though we want to be paid what we're worth and earn what we get, the problem of God's grace makes it theologically impossible to earn righteousness. It's impossible to be paid for a job we don't do.

Righteousness, then, begins as God's gift, and human beings can only receive such a gift by trust. Since this relationship is God's idea, God is the one who reckons righteousness to another. God is the only one qualified to decide whether or not someone is righteous. Therefore, the gift of enjoying such a relationship to God should not be exploited by thinking one becomes righteous enough to earn God's good gifts. To follow the example of Abraham is to share his like-minded trust in the One who makes Abraham's trust possible in the first place.

As you will recall, the law had not yet been revealed to Moses at the time God called Abraham. As Paul explains in Galatians, the law was given 430 years after God's promise to Abraham. Therefore, the grace of God's calling precedes the giving of the law. Paul's thesis is that faith, not law, is the foundation for relating rightly to God.

It wasn't until Abraham was 99 years old that he was circumcised in the flesh. However, by his faith, he was spiritually circumcised long before that. Abraham's faith that was reckoned to him as righteousness is the faith Abraham had before he was circumcised. This reinforces Paul's earlier point that circumcision is not a mark of the flesh. Circumcision is a matter of the heart. Therefore, if someone is genuinely a Jew, then such a person is a Jew inwardly, not outwardly.

Since Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness before he was circumcised, Abraham is the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them (4:11). Abraham is likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow his example before he was circumcised

(4:12).

Righteousness is a possibility for every human being. We share the faith of our founder Abraham (and surely Sarah) by virtue of God's grace, not Abraham's genes. Paul's concern is, who will be considered part of Abraham's family? Would it be just Jews or also Gentiles? Paul answers affirmatively that Abraham is the father of both Gentiles and Jews and all who would be reckoned as righteous by trust in the God who created the covenant with Abraham and raised Jesus from the dead.

Discussion question

- Many affirm with their lips that faith and righteousness are gifts from God and can't be earned, but is there a danger lurking in many of our hearts that we continue to judge people's devotion to God by their degree of involvement in various ministries?