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Sermon Notes

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Abraham's Justification: Faith, Not Works

Romans 4:1-8

I. Introduction: Salvation By Works: The Universal Religion

II. Abraham the Example of Faith

A. Why Paul does this here... the function of Romans 4 in the argument

1. Romans 1:18-3:20 All are sinful, in need of justification

2. Romans 3:21-26... the heart of the Gospel

a. Justification: God's free gift, a legal declaration of righteousness, bought by death of Christ on the cross

b. Propitiation: total removal of God's wrath through a substitutionary sacrifice

c. Demonstration: God demonstrates His justice in justifying sinners based on Christ's work

3. Romans 3:27-31 All of this received simply by FAITH ALONE

a. Justification by FAITH ALONE excludes boasting

b. Justification by FAITH ALONE includes both Jews & Gentiles

c. Justification by FAITH ALONE establishes and upholds the Law

We MUST understand this principle... "by faith alone apart from works"... so, Romans 4 is written to make it clear

4. Interpretative principle: Romans 4:23-24... "Written for US..."

Romans 4:23-24 The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, ²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness--for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

- a. Abraham brought in to explain justification BY FAITH ALONE APART FROM WORKS
- b. He is our example, and by looking at him we understand our own hope

B. Why Paul chooses Abraham

1. Abraham's humanity: fleshing out Paul's theology by a living witness
 - a. Paul a great teacher... too much straight doctrine becomes heavy to digest
 - b. need an illustration !!! "Flesh it out" = bring in a flesh and blood human to show how it works
 - c. abstract theology comes alive in our minds
2. Abraham's antiquity: validating Paul's theology by an ancient witness
 - a. NO NEW DOCTRINAL INNOVATION... this is the "eternal gospel" (Rev. 14:6)
 - b. Abraham lived 2000 years before Paul wrote this letter
 - c. Abraham lived 600 years before the Law came to Moses
 - d. Justification by faith established FIRST in life of Abraham

Now, removing two greatest misconceptions from the minds of Jews (and everyone)

1) God only concerned about the "circumcision"... the Jews; 2) God chooses people based on their piety and godliness

3. Abraham's patriarchy: demonstrating God's universal vision by the "Father of the Jews"
 - a. Jews relished special role as "children of Abraham"
 - b. BUT Abraham was actually a "Gentile" (i.e. uncircumcised) when he was justified
 - c. THUS justification available to anyone... universal appeal of Gospel
 - d. Abraham the father of Jews, but also father of all believing Gentiles
4. Abraham's piety: removing Jewish (and humanity's) pride by a pious "ungodly" man
 - a. common Jewish assumption: Abraham chosen because of his piety
 - b. therefore, we Jews also have to do Abraham's pious works to be saved

c. Abraham the “perfect” man

Genesis 26:4-5 [to Isaac] I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, ⁵ because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws.

Apocryphal writings: *Wisdom of Sirach 44:19-21* Abraham said to have been right with God because of his obedience; *The Prayer of Manasseh* vs. 8 asserted Abraham’s sinlessness; *The Book of Jubilees 23:10* “Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life.”

Rabbinic teachings: Abraham so righteous he began serving God when he was three years old; one of just seven righteous men in all history who had been given the privilege of bringing back the shekinah glory of God to the Temple!!

d. Paul refutes all this by calling Abraham “ungodly” BUT justified by faith

e. POWERFUL SLAYER TO Jewish pride... not because of Abraham’s righteousness was he chosen and saved

f. POWERFUL SLAYER also to humanity’s pride: Abraham WAS a pious man, but even his works were like filthy rags to God

Chrysostom, Homily VIII on Romans: *“For a person who had no works, to be justified by faith was nothing unlikely. But for a person richly adorned with good deeds, not to be made just from these, but from faith, this is the thing to cause wonder, and to set the power of faith in a strong light.”*

IV. The Lesson of Abraham

A. Abraham No Exception (vs. 1-2)

vs. 1-2 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God.

1. Logical flow: IF/THEN

a. If Abraham was justified by works

b. Then: He had a ground for boasting

Justification by works is inevitably tied to boasting... "I did this, so justify me!!!"

2. Paul refutes this with a simple statement

BUT NOT BEFORE GOD!!

- a. not even Abraham, father of the Jewish nation, had a right to boast before God
- b. even pious Abraham as just a sinner before the perfect throne of God

How then was Abraham justified? Same as everyone... he is the first example

B. Abraham's Justification Stated (vs. 3)

vs. 3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

- 1. Paul's constant question is the same as Jesus'... "What does the Scripture say??"
- 2. Question here: How was Abraham viewed by God at his judgment?
- 3. Answer: BY FAITH, APART FROM WORKS
- 4. Context: Genesis 15

Genesis 15:5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

- 5. Simply believing the promise... simple trust... NO WORKS
- 6. "Credited" = imputed, thought of, accounted in the mind of God
 - a. "reckoned" = thought of, though perhaps contrary to actuality
 - b. Jesus was "reckoned" among the ungodly

Isaiah 53:12 "He was counted with the ungodly"

- c. Abraham was reckoned to be righteous in the ledger book of God

C. Abraham's Justification Described (vs. 4-5)

vs. 4-5 “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift but according to debt. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited to him as righteousness.”

1. Works means obligation... common labor principle

No employer says to his employees, “I’m just being gracious to you” on payday... wages mean what you truly deserve

2. God will owe no man a thing... God is never under obligation to a sinner

Romans 11:35 “Who has ever given to God that God should repay him?”

Too many people saunter up to God with a few shabby good works and demand to use them to pay for all their sins!!

3. Three clear statements of justification APART FROM WORKS

- a. Abraham did not work

“To the man who does NOT work but trusts God...”

Note: this is not a license for laziness or ungodliness... just a clear statement that the one who is justified NEVER comes to God in the name of his/her works

- b. Abraham was ungodly

“...but trusts God who justifies the ungodly...”

Shocking word to use of “Father Abraham”... but it is a word that should cause you to leap for joy; how righteous do you need to be? UNGODLY while justified

Everyone who is ever justified by faith is UNGODLY when he is justified... we have no righteousness of our own

Abraham a sinner too... selfish, perhaps idolatrous, sometimes openly disobedient

- c. Abraham received righteousness as a gift by faith

“his faith is credited to him as righteousness”

V. Abraham's Descendent David: Paul's Second Witness (vs. 6-8)

A. The Testimony of Two Witnesses: Saying the Same Thing

1. Abraham clearly justified by faith apart from works
2. Now David "says the same thing"

vs. 6 ***"Just as David also says..."***

3. Jewish Law: "Every matter established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Deuteronomy 19:15)

John 8:17 "In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid."

- a. two witnesses confirms everything
- b. EVEN MORE certain if they are "star" witnesses
- c. two of the top Jewish leaders of all time: Abraham & David... BOTH UNGODLY, JUSTIFIED BY FAITH ALONE

B. BUT Do they "say the same thing"?

vs. 6 ***"David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works."***

1. Up 'til now, "justification" POSITIVE... the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us

Romans 1:17 "in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed from faith to faith..."

Romans 3:21-22 "But now a righteousness from God apart from law has been made known... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe"

- a. asbestos robe... the robe of Christ's righteousness
 - b. "reckoned" to us... imputed to us... God THINKS OF US as positively covered with Christ's righteousness
2. But here, Paul cites Psalm 32... David's great confession Psalm
 - a. possibly sin with Bathsheba... having Uriah killed to cover his adultery
 - b. months and months of denying sin, suppressing it

3. Lesson: NEGATIVE... what God DOES NOT IMPUTE to us... namely, our sins

vs. 7-8 “Blessed is the man whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered; blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.”

- a. justification here is what God DOES NOT IMPUTE to us... our sins
- b. no mention of positive imputation of righteousness!!!
- c. simply God not counting our sins against us

4. DOES DAVID “say the same thing?” to Paul, he does!!!

- a. two sides of the justification coin
- b. negatively: God does not impute (count) our sins against us
- c. positively: God covers us with Christ’s righteousness

C. The Blessedness of Justification

1. Blessed = Eternal happiness under the favor of God

- a. “Gospel” = “Good news”
- b. a message to make you eternally happy, strong, in right relationship with God
- c. first blessing is forgiveness of all sins... all other spiritual blessing come later

Rejoice!!! God’s lengthy record of all your major and minor transgressions forever forgiven!

2. NOT earthly blessings:

- a. health, wealth, comfort, good reputation, prestigious job, spacious home
- b. BUT blessedness of good relationship with God

What blessedness??: “It is well with my soul”

3. The “Beatitudes”: The same lesson as Psalm 32

- a. blessedness given to the spiritual beggars
- b. who recognize their sinfulness & their constant need for grace

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven;

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted;

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

D. The Lessons of Psalm 32: Who Covers Your Sin?

1. Paul’s use: Blessedness of forgiveness COMPLETELY APART FROM WORKS

“Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven...”

a. transgression = willful violation of God’s holy laws; forgiveness = dismissing of the sin

b. OT image is scapegoat... separation between you and your sin

Leviticus 16 “scapegoat”: priest confessed all sins onto the head of the goat, goat led far from Israelites’ camp

Leviticus 16:22 “The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.”

c. distance put between you & your sin in the MIND OF GOD

Psalm 103:12 “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”

2. Sins COVERED

“... whose sins are covered”

a. Gk. word = complete covering (epi-kalupto)

Genesis 7:19-20 [The waters] rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. ²⁰ The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than twenty feet.

Exodus 14:27-28 Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. ²⁸ The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen--the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

Meaning: Blessed is the one whose sin is totally covered by the Lord

Romans 5:20 "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more!!" ...God says to us, "Give me your highest mountain of sin, and I will cover it to a depth of twenty feet with my grace. The army of sins pursuing you, I will swamp them completely with my grace & forgiveness." God is very good at covering! When He

b. third powerful usage!!

Proverbs 28:13 He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

c. long history of "covering" of sin

Adam & Eve sought to hide their sin from God & to cover themselves with fig leaves

Cain tried to conceal his murder of Abel from God

King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, tried to conceal his sin by bringing Uriah home to sleep with his wife... when that didn't work, he concealed his sin by having Uriah murdered... then for nine months and more he concealed his sin from the Lord and from himself

Look at Psalm 32:

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ² Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. ³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"--and you forgave the guilt of my sin. ⁶ Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found

d. David speaks of BLESSEDNESS... utter happiness that results from God's covering of sin... mark of godliness is honesty about sin, joy of God's constant forgiveness!!

e. KEY ISSUE: **who covers your sin?? You or God??**

i) constant human tendency... cover your own sins

ii) sickness results! Deceit leads to a hard heart

iii) God's remedy: constantly flowing shower of grace, experienced through confession

iv) greatest incentive to confession: promise of total forgiveness

vs. 8 *“Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will NEVER count against him.”*

Past sins covered by God... future sins as well

3. God's promise is certain & permanent: NEVER NEVER NEVER WILL I COUNT YOUR SIN AGAINST YOU
 - a. “impute” same word as vs. 3... “credited to your account”
 - b. God will never think of your sin against you again
 - c. Gk. “ou me” double negative... extremely strong expression

Matthew 5:18 *“I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”*

Hebrews 13:5 *“I will NEVER leave you, I will NEVER forsake you.”*

vs. 8 *“Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will NEVER count against him.”*

God will NEVER count your sin against you, for He's already punished Christ for it... this is your powerful incentive to live constantly dependent on the grace of God, constantly confessing sin, accepting his gracious forgiveness

Who covers your sin? You or God?

VI. Summary and Application

A. Summary

1. Paul calls two witnesses: Abraham & David
2. Abraham's lesson: God justified me while I was still ungodly... all I did was trust His incredible promise to me
3. If Abraham had worked for his justification, he could have boasted... but he CAN'T BOAST before God

4. David also speaks of the opposite side of justification... complete forgiveness and covering of all sins FOREVER

B. Application

1. Who covers your sin... you or God? Stop working and trust God
2. Just like Abraham: Simple trust in God's incredible promise in Christ
3. Even Christians need constant confession & forgiveness