

The Father of Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we are studying Romans, Chapter 4. Do you remember how this letter from the Apostle Paul began? After a brief introduction, Paul declares, in striking terms, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile,” {Rom 1:16 NIV}. In those words you have the theme to the book of Romans. It is the “glorious gospel of the blessed God” {1 Tim 1:11 NIV}, as Paul calls it in Ephesians – the gospel that possesses something that men desperately need and search for everywhere.

Yesterday morning in Cincinnati, I spoke to a beautiful young woman who had been divorced a few weeks before. Her husband had deserted her and had run off with another woman. This young woman was a Christian, but she was very much afraid even to contemplate what was ahead for her. She confessed that she was upset and nervous, uncertain of what to do, afraid of the future. As I talked with her I could see that what was troubling her was a lack of any sense of self-worth or respect for herself as a person. Therefore she lacked confidence in herself and feared what would happen to her.

Today you can buy books by the score on the subject of the need for self-worth. It is called self-image, or a sense of significance to your life, or loving and being loved, or accepting and being acceptable: These things are what is meant by the word righteousness in Scripture. Righteousness lies at the heart of the gospel. Paul says in Romans 1:17 {NIV}, “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed.” Paul is talking about that gift of self-worth, that gift of significance, which you can have in the gospel, not only at the beginning of your Christian life, but every day thereafter. It is the ground upon which you face life and the

place from which you operate – it is a gift of the grace of God.

One of the clearest examples of this in Scripture is Abraham, and, in Chapter 4, Paul uses Abraham as an illustration of a man who found this fantastic gift of righteousness, this gift of worth and standing and acceptance and significance before God. Abraham is one of the great names of all history. There are very few names that are known and honored throughout the world in the entire record of human history, but the name Abraham is. He is known, revered, and honored by three faiths. Jews, Muslims, and Christians all honor the name of Abraham. Here is a man who, by any reckoning at all, stands head and shoulders above most of the human race. Paul uses Abraham as an example especially for the Jewish readers of this letter.

We are going to look at the first twelve verses of Chapter 4 this morning. In these twelve verses Paul discusses three important questions about Abraham:

- How was Abraham made righteous?
- When was Abraham made righteous?
- And why was Abraham made righteous?

That is the outline of our study this morning. Let’s take this first one, as Paul introduces it in Verses 1-3:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter [that is, in regard to being acceptable before God]? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about – but not before God. What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” {Rom 4:1-3 NIV}

Paul says that Abraham our forefather discovered two ways to gain a sense of worth: One, Paul suggests, is by works. Abraham was a man of good works. In Genesis, the very first account of Abraham, when he was living in the city of Ur of the Chaldea in the Mesopotamian Valley, describes him as a religious man. Abraham was an idolator and worshipped the moon goddess. But he was not deliberately seeking to evade God. He worshipped the moon goddess in ignorance. It was in the midst of that condition that God appeared to him and spoke to him. Abraham believed God, responded to his call, and set out on a march without a map. He trusted God to lead him to a land he had never seen before, to take care of his family, and to lead them into a place that would fulfill the promises of God. So Abraham appears in the Scripture as a man of great works.

Paul says, "If in fact Abraham was justified [i.e., made righteous] by works, he had something to boast about." Abraham thus discovered early in his life one way of gaining a sense of significance, importance, or self-respect – performance. If you can give a good performance in any endeavor you will be highly thought of, you will gain a sense of being appreciated, you will have a feeling of self-respect, and you will be able to function on that basis.

Paul admits that if Abraham was righteous because of works, he had something to boast about. Works always give you something to boast about. You can look at the record, you can show people what you have done and why you ought to be appreciated. You may not boast openly, but we all have very subtle ways and clever tricks of getting it out into the open so people can see what we have done. You can drop a hint of something you have done, hoping that people will ask some more about it. Somehow you manage things so that people will know you are a person of significance. That is the way the world is today, and the way it was in Abraham's day.

That may work before men, but not before God. God is never impressed by that kind of performance. In fact, God, who sees the heart, is not looking at outward performance; he knows what is going on. He knows the selfishness, the greed, the grasping, the self-centeredness, the ruthlessness with which we cut people out and harm those we profess to love. He sees all the maneuvering and manipulating, the clever arranging that goes on in

our lives and in our hearts. Therefore, to his purposes, that beautiful performance is utterly invalid, worthless, to God. That is why the sense of righteousness that results from our performance before men never lasts. It is but a temporary shot in the arm that we need to repeat again and again, almost as though we were addicted to it. But it will always let us down in the hour of crisis. It is only the righteousness that comes from God that is lasting and will work – not only in time, but for all eternity. That is what Abraham discovered. He discovered that righteousness which comes from performance is worthless.

How did he discover this? Paul says, "What does the Scripture say?" Paul refers to the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, where God appeared before Abraham. He took him out one night and showed him the stars in the heavens. "Abraham, look up!" Abraham looked up into the stillness of that oriental night, with the stars blazing in all their glory. God said to him, "If you can number those stars, you can number your descendants. Their number will be far more than all the stars of heaven." And, Paul says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" – self-worth, standing before God, acceptance, a sense of love and value in the sight of God.

It says that "Abraham believed God," but we have to be careful. These Old Testament accounts are highly condensed versions. They do not give us the details. We have to fill them in from elsewhere in Scripture, and oftentimes we need to use a bit of sanctified imagination, guided by what the passage gives us. From other passages we know that God did not just say, "Abraham, see the stars? So shall your seed be." But we learn that God explained to Abraham what he meant by "seed."

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul tells us that God made it clear to Abraham that when God said, "so shall your seed be" {cf, Gal 3:16}, he was talking about Jesus Christ, who would be the seed of Abraham. God evidently explained to Abraham that there was One coming who would fulfill all the promises that Abraham would have a heavenly seed as well as the earthly seed of his physical descendants. With regard to his spiritual descendants God said his seed would be Jesus. It is through Jesus that all Abraham's seed would be fulfilled.

That is why, on one occasion, when Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, they said to him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them. "If

Abraham were your father, you would believe me, because Abraham saw my day and was glad," {cf, John 8:56}. So God evidently explained to Abraham, and Abraham understood by faith that the seed of righteousness, Jesus the Lord, was coming and that he would die on the cross to remove the penalty and guilt of man's misbehavior and to settle the question of the justice of God. He would rise again from the dead as a living Lord to give his life to men and women everywhere, thus fulfilling the promise to Abraham. Abraham believed God. He believed God's promise about the seed, and so he was justified, made righteous, given the gift of a sense of worth.

Interestingly enough, when James quotes this passage from Genesis 15 he says (in James 2), "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," then he adds, "and he was called God's friend," {Jas 2:23 NIV}. That is acceptance, isn't it? Abraham became God's friend – not because he behaved so well, or because he was a godly man and obeyed God – he became the friend of God because he believed God's promise about the seed. Abraham is a beautiful example of what Paul is talking about here in Romans.

Paul illustrates this in Verses 4-5:

Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited [or reckoned] as righteousness. {Rom 4:4-5 NIV}

Here is an illustration taken from common life, and it is very up to date. Tomorrow I must sit down and fill out my income tax. There is a very tantalizing regulation in the income tax law that awakens my cupidity every year. The rule says that if you have money given to you as a gift, it is not taxable. I keep looking for ways that will make it appear to the IRS that all the money I receive from my various functions as a pastor is really a gift. But the IRS will never buy it. They insist that if you work, what you are given is not a gift, but wages, and must be reported.

This is exactly the argument Paul uses. If you work for something, then what you get is never a gift, it is what you have earned. You have it as a result of your labor; it is an obligation that must be paid. Therefore you yourself can take the credit for

having earned it. But then Paul draws a conclusion in Verse 5: "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." He is reckoned righteous – not because he earned it, but as a gift. Who is Paul talking about? From the context it is clearly Abraham. This could read:

However, to this man Abraham, who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, the ungodly, his faith is credited to him as righteousness – worth, acceptance, standing, and love from God. {Rom 4:5 RCS Paraphrase}

This is an amazing declaration of the gospel. It is startling to think that Abraham was a wicked man, but he was. Anybody who tries to earn acceptance, to earn God's love, to earn a place of respect and standing before God by trying hard to do things for him, is a wicked person. That is what the Scriptures say. We are trying to gain something by our own merit that can never be gained that way. Therefore it is the height of wickedness.

Many, many Christians fall back into this trap. Having once accepted the Christ and believed on him for their eternal destiny, they spend the rest of their lives trying to gain a sense of God's approval and love by hard, exhausting, committed, dedicated labor. And you can never win God's love that way. You never know when you have done enough. You cannot earn the gift of love, but it is yours if you take it by faith in Christ, fresh every morning.

Paul now brings in another illustration from the Old Testament to confirm this. He says David expressed the same idea when he spoke of the blessedness of the man to whom God credited righteousness apart from works. Paul says David is another man who gained this wonderful basis of operation – not by his performance, but by his faith. In Verses 7-8 Paul quotes David's 32nd Psalm:

**Blessed are they whose offenses have been forgiven,
and whose sins have been covered.
Blessed is the man
whose sins the Lord will never count
against him." {Rom 4:7-8 NIV}**

Those of you who heard Stuart Briscoe Wednesday night heard a marvelous exposition of similar words in the 51st Psalm. During a Monday

morning breakfast, he gave a beautiful exposition of the 32nd Psalm which Paul quotes here. The remarkable thing is that David found this gift of self-worth before God when he was tortured by a guilty conscience. His hands were red with the blood of the murder of Uriah the Hittite, and he was troubled with a wrong spirit that had plunged him into deep evil as the king of Israel.

Paul points out that Abraham failed to find righteousness by being devout and moral; he found it when he believed in Jesus, the seed. He was called the friend of God, not because he was such an obedient servant, but because he believed in what God said. And the bloody-handed, lustful king, David, failed to find righteousness by being the king of Israel. In the midst of his evil he found it in Christ when he believed God; he believed that God did not require the sacrifice of animals, but a broken spirit that trusted in what God had to say about the great sacrifice that was yet to come. And David is called a man after God's heart.

Now, would you like to be a friend of God, a man or a woman after God's own heart: This is what Paul is telling us. There is a way – not by your performance, but by your trust in Jesus' life and death and work and what it means for you every day.

The apostle moves on to take up the question of when this happens. He says in Verses 9-11,

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received circumcision as a sign and seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. {Rom 4:9-11a NIV}

I find a lot of people today who are very embarrassed by God's emphasis upon circumcision. Because of their upbringing, these people feel that sex is dirty, and that our sexual organs are never to be discussed or mentioned. They think that our bodies end at the waist. That, of course, represents a very twisted view of human sexuality. God frequently discusses circumcision. He chose it as the symbol of this marvelous truth that we are talking about this morning, and he gave it to the Jews for a

specific purpose. God is not in the least embarrassed by that fact, and I don't think we should be either. Those who fail to think through this whole matter of circumcision miss some very powerful insights into human life.

Paul makes two points here:

1. First of all, Abraham was circumcised fourteen years after he was pronounced righteous by faith, fourteen years after he was called the friend of God. Therefore the ritual of circumcision cannot have any saving value whatsoever. Abraham was already God's friend fourteen years before he was circumcised. You can see how effectively that wipes out all the arguments of the Jews, from Paul's day on, who claim that it is the ritual that makes you acceptable. This, of course, cancels out the modern equivalent of circumcision – baptism. People are justified – made righteous, accepted in God's sight – not by being baptized, but by faith in the Lord Jesus, in his work and in his death.

I will never forget the young man who came into my study one day, Bible in hand, and announced that he had been reading the Bible. He didn't know a lot about it, but he said, "Would you circumcise me?" I blinked three or four times, then said, "Why?" He said, "I've been reading in this Bible that if you want to know God you have to be circumcised. I want to know God, so I want to be circumcised." I had the joy of telling him what circumcision meant, that it was simply a sign of something that was already true by faith. That boy became a Christian and is still in our congregation and growing in the Lord.

2. The second point that Paul makes here is that not only is ritual valueless in saving anyone, but that the real purpose of circumcision was two-fold: It is a sign and a seal.

- Now let us not be prudish at this point. I do not want to offend anyone by what I say, but I just want to point out that God thinks this is highly important. God says that he chose the place on a man's body where this sign, this rite of circumcision, would be placed. God chose to put it on the male organ, and I think it is obvious

why. God wants us to remember what this ritual stands for. The most important thing you can remember in your life is where you find love and self-acceptance and standing and significance before man and God. So God placed it – out of all the parts of the body he could have chosen – on this organ, because a man, by nature, has to handle it several times a day. It is a sign, therefore, that would be impossible to overlook.

- Furthermore, Paul says, it is not only a sign, but a seal. A seal is a guarantee of permanency. Once again, the rite of circumcision, which removes the foreskin of the male organ, is an unchangeable act. Once it is done, it cannot be undone. Therefore it is a guarantee of the continuity of this great truth. It is God's expressive way of saying with visible force, "This is the ground of your life, the secret of your functioning as a human being, this great truth of acceptance before me. And it will never change."

In Verses 11-12 Paul discusses the question of why Abraham was made righteous. Beyond the personal salvation of Abraham himself, God had another reason.

So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. {Rom 4:11b-12 NIV}

The words "So then" really should be, "It was to make him" a father. Paul is not talking about circumcision; he is talking about what circumcision stands for: The gift of being made acceptable before God, being loved by God, a gift of worth from God. That was given to Abraham, not only for his own personal purposes, but to make him a father of many more yet to come. Remember the stars in the heavens? That promise is yet to be fulfilled.

We here today are not, for the most part, physical descendants of Abraham. I happen to be; I learned several years ago from the genealogist of

the Stedman tribe that the Stedmans go back to Abraham, through Ishmael. That makes me a physical descendant – but I am not boasting of that. However, we are spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham when we, too, have received worth and self-respect by believing, as Abraham did, that God meant what he said. And he gives us this gift in Jesus Christ, quite apart from any merit on our part. This is what fatherhood means.

Jesus illustrated this when he said to the Pharisees of his day, "You are of your father the devil," {cf, John 8:44}. Now Jesus did not mean that in some way the devil had been involved in their conception. What he means is they were following the philosophy of the devil. They were agreeing with and controlled by the philosophy of the devil, so they were sons and daughters of the devil. The devil was their father.

Likewise, we think and act like Abraham when we trust that the basis of our acceptance by God is what Jesus is and has done for us – not anything that we are doing. In this way Abraham is our father and we are his spiritual descendants. Paul says this is true for those who are uncircumcised, and yet who keep on believing in Jesus; and it is true of those who are circumcised, the Jews, who also walk in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham. So Jews are not saved by being circumcised; they are saved by trust in God.

This is the great secret of life.

What a change this makes in your motivation if you know that you do not have to earn God's love, God's favor, God's forgiveness. It is already yours.

You do not have to earn it, it is yours every day. There is nothing I know that will set you free more than that.

You do not need to take your sense of worth from other people. You do not need to maneuver and manipulate and cleverly show yourself as a person of some significance. You are set free from that. You already have the only standing that ever counts – your standing before God.

So you can relax and give people love without demanding anything back. That is what Christianity is all about.

That is a great gift, a fantastic gift.

Let us thank God for this.

Prayer:

Father, we ask that you will forgive us for any lingering desire in our heart to try to earn a standing before you, for any hungering after the righteousness that comes from men – a gift of self-worth and self-image extracted from others through manipulating and maneuvering and clever posturing. Forgive us that, and help us accept this

marvelous gift of acceptance before you, this gift of worth given fresh every day. Help us to live and operate on that basis as Abraham did, and as Moses did, and as the other mighty men and women of God did in the past. We know that these words are true. This is the way you operate, and we can find the effect of them in our lives today. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.