

Lent 2: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Apart from the Law

16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. My brothers and sister in Christ Jesus, today, I have a question for you. What is this? Well, it's a bowl Pastor. Perhaps you might think that I have somewhat lost my mind with that question. It's so simple. You must think I'm really dumb if you are asking me a question like that.

But is it, though? This bowl, was found in the basement of my house. I am confident that you have never ever seen this object before in your entire life. But in a fraction of a second, you know what this is and what it's used for. You saw its shape, that it's circular with a concave shape, it's made of a somewhat durable material, perhaps even its color, and your brain goes "Bowl". You use it to keep food in, and you eat out of it, or you can hold all kinds of things in it.

It is, in fact, a bowl, it's not a trick question. But what is my point. You as a human are capable of unconsciously analyzing something that you have never seen before, and know with relative certainty, what it is and what it is used for.

Now, in day to day terms, this is a wonderful asset. But in the spiritual realm, this same attribute is alive and at work, but is very dangerous. You, as a human being, assume some things. You know that there is a God. Likewise, you know that he is powerful, having made the world and all that there is. You assume that he is wise and has influence over the things of this world. You also know that God, the all powerful, all knowing, has some standards by which he judges you and by which he is pleased or displeased.

But the most dangerous thing that the sinful nature does with our knowledge of God, is to assume how it is that we please him, how we earn our salvation. In fancy theological terminology, we call it the *opinio legis*. But you don't have to know what the term means to understand it. Because all of you have felt its grip at some point. It is the natural, sinfully natural idea, that we have the obligation, the ability, to work out our salvation. That we in some form or manner are involved in our salvation, by what we have done, or by some inherent quality that is present within us.

So powerful is this assumption that even times that even Jews who had the Old Testament, some of whom had been brought to Christianity, had let this idea of working out salvation seep into their minds. And it is precisely what Paul is trying to correct them on. There were some who had put their hope in their actions, the fact that they were Jewish, descended from God's Holy people in the Old Testament, they were circumcised in accordance with God's command to them in the law.

Paul shows laser sharp focus by going after the heart of their confidence: Abraham. The father of their nation. Seen as the example to many Jews of a righteous man because of his actions. The recipient of the circumcision covenant. The hero of their law.

Paul writes: **"What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness."** Paul says to these in fact, Abraham wasn't righteous because of his actions, it was not by his works, it was by belief. By his works he might be able to boast before other people, but not before God.

He, in the section in between our text, he goes on to say that his circumcision didn't do it either. In fact, he was circumcised after the credit of righteousness had been given.

And finally, he goes after the law as a whole: **"For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath."** The law in general. Rules commands bring nothing but the wrath of God. You transgress them and God punishes.

What is Paul's point to these Jews? Your father Abraham, whom you have falsely hitched your cart to, was not saved, or blessed, or declared righteous by anything that he did. Not by his works. Not by circumcision. Not by the Law. And neither are you.

That's for those people pastor, what does this have to do with me? Well, the warning is there for us too. You need to be aware, constantly aware, that this thought is alive in you too. It certainly is alive in me.

Throughout our lives, the sinful nature will try, in ever so sneaky ways, to make us think that we are somehow involved in our salvation. Perhaps it's not as obvious, as I did a good thing and God now has to let me into heaven. But have we used our behavior as a way of exalting ourselves? The fact that we have avoided a sin as a sense of pride before others who have fallen prey to temptation, somehow we are better. Works. Have we lambasted the fact that I am a Christian because I was more willing, more receptive, perhaps just a more moral person than others who are not? Works. Have we ever thought about the idea that if I do something right, if I go to church this week, if I pray more often, if I embed the 10 commandments on my wrists, God will have to bless me, God will have to be happy with me, God deserves to save me because I'm doing such an excellent job? Works.

Brothers and sisters, Paul clarified it for them. He clarifies it for us. There is absolutely nothing we have done that curries God's favor. There is absolutely nothing in me that makes me deserving of his love. There is not a single thing that I can do that will save me from my sins.

So, what does? **"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all of Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham."** It is grace. It is always grace. It is only grace. It is totally apart from the works of the law.

Why is this so important? It is that word: **Guaranteed** It is guaranteed for you. Your salvation is not dependent on anything about you and what you have done. It is dependent on the miraculous grace and promise of your all powerful God. It is guaranteed by the events that have taken place for you, not by you but for you, by your Savior Jesus. One who died the death you should have had and has said that it is finished. Your Savior has promised you that his death is sufficient and because of him, not you, you are guaranteed forgiveness, guaranteed salvation, guaranteed life everlasting.

It does not matter who you are. It does not matter who your parents are or where you were born. God has promised that whoever you are, he died for you and his forgiveness is for you. It does not matter what rotten and filthy things you have done in the days of your youth

or yesterday. Your God has promised you that because of his Son, you are forgiven for those. It does not matter if you look at yourself and feel that you are worthless and dirty and God could and would never love you. Your God promises you that you are his child and that he loves you, he sees you as special, he wants you to be by his side for all eternity.

How do we fight that assumption? How do we fight that sinful nature that will continue to try to butt in and say: "Yep, I helped!" It is contact with God's means of Grace. It is running back to the grace God showers you with. It is remembering and running back to the font of Baptism where God marked you as his due to no cooperation on our part, where we drown the sinful nature daily. It is coming to the altar, to receive his body and blood and the promise of grace that covers your sins. It is being in his word, overflowing with his Holy Words of Gospel. That makes us stand awed by the love of God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ. When you look at this, you still assume it's a bowl. Our sinful nature is cunning and dangerous, and will continue to assume that you can work out your salvation. Praise be to God that that is not the case. Praise be to God that he sends his Holy Spirit through his word and sacraments to fight the sinful nature. Praise be to God, that he, apart from anything I have done, considers me righteous for the sake of Christ. Amen.