

Sermon 22: Romans 4:1-5: Abraham was justified by faith

OUTLINE

Abraham believed and did not work

Justification is by believing not by works

Believing is not a work

INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871) was a granddaughter to the famous Evangelical preacher Henry Venn. When she was in her thirties she suffered a serious illness that affected her health for the rest of her life. A Swiss minister and musician Dr Caesar Malan visited the family home and noticed that she lacked rest and peace, so he asked her whether she was a Christian. She resented the question and told him so, to which he replied that he merely wanted her to know God's peace. Later she came back to him and apologized for being rude. She admitted that she did want to become a Christian, but that she did not know how. She thought about how few good works she had, her pride and other sins, and she believed that she first had to make herself worthy before she came to Christ. Dr Malan replied with these words, 'Come to Him just as you are.' Telling her that there were no works she needed to do to prepare herself to be forgiven in Christ. These few simple words were sufficient, and she was converted. Peace immediately filled her heart. However, her fight to try and make herself acceptable to God by works was not over. 14 years later she was at her brother's house, and there was much activity as various family and friends were preparing a bazaar to raise money to build a school for underprivileged children. Being very ill and weak she was unable to help in any way, and had to stay home while the others went out and served. In her depression she was haunted once again by the spectre of works righteousness, and in the midst of her spiritual and physical pain she reached for a pen and wrote these words: 'Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come. A hymn that has been used to great effect to help sinners see that you do not have to come to God through works to receive righteousness, but you come as you are to be cleansed.

As we move into a new chapter in Romans we are once again confronted with Paul addressing the spectre of works righteousness. As sinners we are as thick as bricks when it comes to learning basic spiritual truths. Paul has been stressing and arguing that we are justified by faith apart from works, but he knows that we are very slow to learn. So in this chapter, a chapter aimed particularly at convincing the Jewish mind of justification by faith, Paul is going to prove from OT examples that what he is saying about justification is not a manmade dream, but rather the teaching of the word of God. The whole of chapter 4 is concerned with proving how Abraham was dealt with by God on the basis of faith not law or circumcision. We are going to study the first 5 verses looking at Paul's stress on Abraham's being justified by faith not works. Our three points are: Abraham believed and did not work; Justification is by believing not by works; and, Believing is not a work.

Abraham believed and did not work

If 1st Century Jews lived today they would probably wear a rubber bracelet saying WWAD, 'What Would Abraham Do?' Abraham holds the primary position in the Jewish religion. He is the Father of the faith, the source of the nation of Israel, the one to whom the original covenant of circumcision was given to, and the one to whom the promise of the land of Canaan was made. Matthew's Gospel establishes Jesus' credentials as Messiah on the basis of the fact that He was the 'Son of Abraham,' (Matt. 1:1). And so in order to prove that justification is by faith Paul is going to demonstrate how Abraham was justified by faith.

It cannot be doubted that Abraham held a central place, but the trouble was Abraham was viewed as being the exemplary example because he was seen to be one who won the favour and friendship of God on the basis of works. Here are some quotes about Abraham's righteousness from early Jewish sources: 'Abraham was a great father of many nations, and no one was found like him in glory, who kept the law of the Most High, and entered into covenant with Him, and established the covenant in his flesh, and was found faithful in testing.' (Sirach 44:19-20); 'Abraham did not walk in it (evil), and he was reckoned a friend of God because he kept the commandments of God and did not choose his own will.' (Damascus document 3:2-4); 'Was not Abraham found faithful in temptation and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' (1 Maccabees 2:52). This last verse in the Apocrypha is reflecting on the sacrificing of Isaac. The tendency was to take Abraham's faith and view it as his faithfulness. The idea of trust was lost as the emphasis was placed on Abraham's doing. In order for Paul to establish that we are justified by faith alone to the Jewish mind he has to overturn the reigning interpretive paradigm concerning Abraham.

He begins then in 4:1, 'What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?' Here we see Paul anticipating the Jewish objection on the basis of their works based righteousness interpretation of Abraham. 4:2, 'For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.' Drawing in some of the conclusions he has already established in the last section, namely the fact that no one can boast in what they have received only what they have earned; and that God alone should be glorified for our salvation. He now shows the works righteousness defender that Abraham could not have been justified by works of law and circumcision because no one can boast before God, not even Abraham. Now there are various lines of argument that Paul could have pursued to prove that even Abraham cannot boast before God. He could have spoken about all our good deeds having the value of filthy rags in God's sight when it comes to earning our way into heaven. He could have spoken about how even Abraham's faith and repentance were enabled gifts and cannot flow from a dead sinful nature without the intervention of the Holy Spirit effectually calling the sinner. However, Paul instead takes a better road the road of Scripture and quotes Genesis 15:6 as a proof text that Abraham was justified by faith. 4:3, 'For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'

Our sole authority in faith and life is the Scriptures, and so it was for Paul as well. This was his manner for settling any matter of faith, if the Bible taught it that settled it. It could be

about male headship in the home and church, or the historicity of Adam, or the universal effects of sin, Paul established his beliefs on the basis of the teachings of the Scripture. Genesis 15:6 is the first mention of faith in the Bible and speaks to this very question. Genesis 15:6, 'And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.' Paul has not only quoted this verse because it is the first mention of faith, but it also connects faith and being counted righteous by God. Not only that it credits Abraham as being righteous on account of his faith, before he was circumcised (Gen. 17:29). This then acts as a positive statement to establish the fact that Abraham was declared righteous by God by faith not according to works.

What we want to do now is try and understand the nature of Abraham's faith, we are told that he 'believed God.' What does this mean? What doesn't this mean? Let's begin by saying what is not meant by Paul. Firstly, what is not meant is some vague sentimental religious feeling which our modern pluralists credit to every religion. Abraham's faith is not the universal religious experience that lies at the heart of every belief system. Christian faith cannot be reduced to some 'utter sense of dependence' and evacuated of all its distinctiveness. The tendency to reduce all religions to one big happy family is generally the past time of Western University professors and politicians, it is a practice that even Muslims, Hindu's, Buddhists and others would object to. Secondly, we need to reject the psychological definition of faith where we are told by psychology that our belief in God is a projection of our greatest fears or our greatest needs. A projection of a father we long to have or some other deep need. Abraham was not seeking a god to worship but was sought and called by God. Thirdly, we need to reject the RCC teaching on faith. They teach that faith is assent, in other words it consists of knowledge about certain facts and the acceptance of those facts. Abraham's faith goes beyond mere intellectual assent into trust and dependence. Fourthly, Abraham's faith is not rationalistic. In other words Abraham has not by the powers of his intellect sought out God and determined that God by verifying the evidence is trustworthy. Abraham's faith rests upon God's self-disclosure, revelation not reason.

Let's look at the positive aspects of Abraham's faith. Paul uses characteristics of Abraham's faith as they are revealed in other settings to unpack this original faith we are seeing in Genesis 15:6. Firstly, Abraham believed in the character of God as trustworthy and good. This we are told in 4:21, 'fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.' True faith in God consists in not merely believing that He exists, the devil does that, but believing that He is reliable and keeps His promises. In the Gospel we could point to the promise of those who believe receiving eternal life (Jn. 3:16). Secondly, Abraham believed that God could do what he could not do for himself. Abraham was too old to have children, he was unable to bring the promise of blessing to all nations to pass, he was unable to take possession of the land of Canaan, but Abraham trusted that God was rich where he was poor, strong where he was weak, and would provide what he could not. Paul draws this element of Abraham's faith out in 4:19, 'He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.' Simply put we could say that trustingly looked to God, and distrustingly looked away from self. This is important because there

were Jews who wanted to stress that Abraham was omniscient and saved himself by his works as an example for us all, but Paul is showing how this was not the case; rather Paul is showing how Abraham viewed himself as poor not rich and dependent on God not self.

There is a third aspect of Abraham's faith that Paul does not venture to discuss in this chapter, and that was to what extent Abraham knew about Christ. The most likely reason why Paul does not discuss this here is because the point that Paul wants to establish is that Abraham saw himself as poor not rich, and believed and did not work for righteousness. Paul is stressing those parts of faith that relate to self-effort and self-righteousness, not as it focuses on Christ, though he does not doubt allude to this in various other places (Rom 3:22; Acts 20:21). However, it will be helpful for us to say something about this. I know that this is a question that has troubled me, and getting a biblical answer puts many other things into place as well. In answering this question there have been opposing extremes which we will want to avoid. Firstly, there is the mistake of anachronism, that is taking NT faith in Christ and copying and pasting into the OT with no differences. Secondly, there are those who merely see Abraham's faith as a pattern for Christian faith but not an OT faith in Christ. These are the errors of anachronism and analogy. Let me stress that in attempting to answer this question we have to be guided by Scripture not what we think or take to be reasonable. The Holy Spirit is the author of faith and we must not fall into the trap of rationalistic thinking that needs everything to be verifiable on natural grounds not supernatural ones.

There are to my mind two clear texts that indicate that Abraham had an OT faith in Christ these are John 8:56, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad;' and Gal 3:8, 'And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed.'" Here we see Jesus telling us that Abraham saw Christ's day afar off and rejoiced in what he saw implying a level of understanding. And secondly, Paul tells us that Abraham had the Gospel preached to him and it was bound up in the words, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' There are many questions that we would like to ask, but at least we can see that Abraham knew something of Christ in that he rejoiced and had the gospel preached to him, this then disqualifies the faith of Abraham as a mere analogy for NT faith. Now in order to avoid the error of anachronism we need to stress that Abraham did not know the name Jesus, but as seeing afar off he would have seen something of what God intended by Him. In Gal 3:16 Paul highlights the singular use of the word 'seed/offspring' and that this is speaking of Christ. Abraham very probably had a notion of a promised seed which comes from the original preaching of the Gospel in Genesis 3:15, a promised Son, who would defeat satan, releasing Adam's race from the consequences of the fall, and being bruised in the battle but finally overcoming. It is most likely that Abraham expected the child promised to Eve to be born from him. Abraham did not know His name nor all that was entailed in Him saving us, but his hope was steadfast upon Him, however as from afar. We need not doubt that the Spirit taught Abraham of the saviour in shadow as He was given in the promise; there are many other amazing aspects to Abraham's faith that is unexpected in an OT context. For example, we see him anticipating a city whose builder

is God, and the resurrection of Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:10, 19). Our confidence is in God who knows how to reveal Himself not in Abraham and his ability to reason.

We see, as we return to Romans 4:3 that God 'counted' Abraham's faith for righteousness. This word has a history to it as well. In some older translations you will have it as 'imputed' or 'reckoned'. This word has a very simple meaning as it is taken from the world of economics. An easy way to illustrate it would be to use the depositing of money in another's account. If I put 1 million dollars in your account I am counting it as yours, it is reckoned to you, or imputed to you. Paul is addressing the issue of you receiving righteousness, as a gift not as a wage. When Abraham believed, God credited Abraham's righteousness account with a perfect righteousness. And this is the truth of what happens to us when we put our faith in Christ, all His righteousness becomes ours and we are declared righteous by God. How do we get this righteousness into our accounts, and credited to us, in our names? By faith not by works! Paul repeats this idea in Romans 5:17 when he talks about the 'free gift of righteousness.' Romans 5:17, 'For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.'

This word is popular because it has featured in the debates between Roman Catholics and Protestants. The RRC teaches that when we are justified by God we are not credited with Christ's righteousness and thereby obtain a new legal status, instead we are infused with Christ's righteousness. So the idea is one of imparted righteousness not imputed righteousness, a change to our being not merely of our legal status. Of course, the word as Paul uses it is not intended to imply that Abraham was infused with righteousness, but rather that he was brought into a new legal status of righteous. How?

Justification is by believing not by works

Paul does not leave us in any doubt as to what he means as he clarifies it for us in v4, 'Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.' Paul as a good preacher is illustrating his point, and in order to cast the opposing ideas into stark contrast he contrasts the idea of a wage with the idea of a gift. If you work your payment is your wage and is your due. But if you don't work and receive righteousness apart from works it is a gift and not earned. Paul explains this in v5, 'And to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.' The contrast is a simple one it is a case of gift vs wage and works vs faith. If we work for righteousness it is given as our due, but if we trust in God to provide what we cannot provide for ourselves then God gives us that righteousness as a gift. Abraham received righteousness on account of the fact that he believed, therefore it could never have been by works.

There is one last phrase that we want to concern ourselves with in this passage, 'Him who justifies the ungodly.' That is the whole Gospel right there. Let me draw out four things from this phrase. Firstly, we need to revisit the word 'propitiation.' You remember that we

looked at 3:25 we came across this amazing word 'propitiation.' It means to appease, pacify or turn away anger. And we saw how vital this was to the Gospel that we see Jesus as our propitiatory sacrifice. We saw how God's glory is at stake in the forgiving of sinner if Jesus is not our propitiation. In an earthly courtroom no human judge can forgive sin and release the sinner without violating the law, but because Jesus took our place and He Himself paid our sin debt with His death, He satisfied God's righteous anger as judge towards our sins. God justifies the ungodly, not by ignoring their sins, not by renaming them, but by paying for them with the precious blood of Christ. Secondly, we need to take this statement as part of Paul's argument in Rom 4:1-5. We know that the Jews thought that God credited Abraham with righteousness as a wage because of his works. But please notice the deliberate wording of this phrase which bars any such interpretation. God justifies the UN-godly, it does not say God justifies the godly. In other words, when we look at Abraham's being declared righteous we should not see God giving a good man his due, but a bad man something he does not deserve. Thirdly, this phrase is borrowed capital from other verses in the OT that speak about human judges (Prov. 17:15). However, in Prov 17:15 we see a different word being used, 'justify the wicked,' but Paul uses 'justifies the ungodly.' Paul has chosen a word that has stronger connotations to it. He is painting a picture of God declaring righteous the most unlikely and undeserving person, the one who denies and refuses to obey Him directly. In other words, a person who not only hates his neighbour breaking the second table of the law; but someone who hates God and breaks the first 4 commandments as well. Paul is holding out this hope of justification to the very worst of people not the best. He wants us to know that it is for the unworthy not the worthy, that Jesus came for the poor and sick not the healthy. Fourthly, Paul by this statement is telling us that we don't have to clean up before we come to God, but that we come as we are. God justifies ungodly people, foul people, failing people. We do not have to quit our sins before we come to Christ we quit them after. We cannot make ourselves worthy of receiving the forgiveness that Christ has bought with His life and death. Every attempt we make to clean ourselves up is like us smearing mud all over ourselves. Every self-saving effort is an insult that is counter-productive. And so on that note let us end where we began. Charlotte Elliott did not know how to come to God, she thought that she had to buy her way in, clean up in some way first, but God justifies the ungodly. Let's close by singing, 'Just as I am....'