

Stowe Paris Church, Sunday 5th March: Romans 4:1-5 +13-17

I wonder what are the moments in your life that you are most proud of?

Maybe its your 1st class degree certificate on your wall? Maybe its when you stood in front of your first house? Maybe its when you crossed the line for the marathon with a new PB, or maybe its when your kids finished school?

Often our proudest moments are the ones we work hardest for. That degree certificate contains memories of multiple late nights and hard study, the marathon required early mornings and pain staking determination, even your children embody years of parenting, difficult conversations and encouragement.

We all know what it feels like to look back and think 'wow i'm really proud of what I've/ we've achieved. To know you worked towards a goal and the effort wasn't a waste.

The stuff we are most proud of are often the things we work hardest for. Because if you want to achieve anything you have to work for it, thats just how life works.

Its not just the stuff we are proud of but to get anything really in life you have to work for it.

Whats the phrase- 'theres no such thing as free lunch'. No one gets given certificates without work.

And so naturally lot's of people assume that when it comes to God, surely it must be the same? God must be like my boss, afterall he's the ultimate authority figure. If I want the promotion I need to

come before him with my monthly hours and earnings and cash it in for a cheque of blessing.

If I want good things from him then surely I need to earn them from him?

And that *is* what lots of religions teach in different forms. Often its the motivation to behave morally, to be kind, its so that God thinks well of us and we get the certified stamp, 'GOOD PERSON'.

And yet we're going to see in these verses from Romans this morning that Christianity is radically different.

Because these verses say that when it comes to the most precious thing you could possibly be given by God, the way to receive it is not by earning it...but by him giving it to us as a free gift.

That's the big thing we're going to see...

1. Righteousness comes through faith not works

Lets look at the passage.

In order to convince us of this Paul wants to unpack the case study example of Abraham.

*'What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?'*

For Jews in the old testament Abraham was a real hero of the Jewish religion and he was the epitome of their culture, infact he was the very first Jew in fact. So if anyone knew anything about knowing God and being in his good books it was Abraham.

So how did he do it? What's the secret?

*'Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness'*

Paul quotes from Genesis 15, right at the start of the bible, a whole 2000 years or so before Romans was written to one of the first encounters between God and Abraham.

The God of the universe arrives in the presence of this man Abraham and declares his family is set apart from the rest of humanity, they will have a special land, a special relationship with God, and that his descendants will fill the earth.

Have a look at verse 3

*'What does Scripture say... as God and Abraham meet and correspond, God pours into the relationship the promise of devotion, security and prosperity... what does Abraham bring to the table, money? An army?*

*'Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness'*

When Abraham is declared righteous, Paul means to show that according to justice God has pronounced Abraham clean innocent in his sight.

We hear of cases in courts from the news (whether Amber Heard vs Johnny Debt). When the judge bangs his gavel, it's a serious moment, climatic moment, the verdict is being announced. Imagine if you were in court for not paying a £40 parking fine. The accusation is from last year and you plead not guilty, and you present evidence of a parking ticket on the precise day you are being accused. The verdict from the Judge would be 'not guilty', innocent.

What they have done is justified the accused, they have declared you 'not guilty' and you are in right relationship with the parking regulations. You have no condemnation hanging over you.

So Abraham was considered righteous. He was considered before God the way we were before the parking regulations, not guilty. But unlike our example Abraham was guilty of breaking the law. he hadn't got a parking ticket that he had paid for as evidence to prove him innocent. And furthermore the price for the ticket of sin is far more than £40.

And much like Abraham, Paul has shown earlier in Romans that all of humanity are similar, we naturally fall into the unrighteous category before the Judge God. On our own the gavel should come down, guilty.

And yet Abraham is pronounced 'Righteous'. Look at verse 5- 'However to the one who does not work but trusts God, who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness' So God justifies the ungodly. How?

Now that work 'credited' in verse 3, crops up 11 times in the chapter.

V4- 'wages are not credited as a gift'

V5- 'their faith is credited as righteousness'

V6, 8, 9 and verse 10. Its all over the place

Its a word that refers to how God legally credits to unrighteous people 'righteousness' in a similar way to money being credited to a bank account. Imagine a bank account being in significant debt, a huge negative red number at the bottom of the bank statement.

And then imagine a huge sum of money being deposited, credited to that account, in an instant the debt is removed. God credits Abrahams account of righteousness, it goes from being in the red- guilty, to immediately being Innocent.

But how was he actually credited righteousness?

But what did it mean for Abraham to Believe?

Well Abaham trusted God and accepted the promise that God gave him. Faith in God was the chanel by which Ahraham accepted Gods justification.

And for the believer today, similarly to 'believe' – is to simply trust and accept the promise God has given us. It simply means to trust in Jesus.

This is what Romans 3:23 says:

*'...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.'*

Go back to my parking fine illustration in the courtroom, its as if the evidence brought forward is a paid for ticket by Jesus. He's gone and paid for our punishment, so according to justice we can still be considered righteous.

And so righteousness comes through faith not works.

So therefore it's so different from those proud moment examples we thought about at the start.

When it comes to knowing God, it can only be through faith in Jesus.

Our works could never be good enough!

And so you can see why in verse 2 God says there was no place for boasting in Abraham, there was no place to be proud of what he had achieved.

Now what difference does that make for us? We might have heard salvation by faith alone only a few times, but some of us have heard it a thousand times.

There is a huge encouragement but also a warning in this:

Firstly the encouragement:

It might be that when it comes to God, you've always just felt 'I don't feel good enough for him.'

Or perhaps you look around and other people seem so religious and so much better than you and you feel like you could never be like them.

But these verses are saying when it comes to knowing God, it's not a question of 'are you good enough?' or 'how do you compare to the person sitting next to you?' ...

Because thats just not the basis

No, actually only one question matters. And that is 'Can you trust Jesus? Can you say to him, Jesus you are my only hope of being righteous before God.'

Well the promise here is that for all who are willing to do that, God will declare you to be righteous.

In the moment when you trust in Jesus, God credits you with righteousness.

Think back to that translation into the bank account.

Righteousness doesn't come in instalments, it doesn't grow like an investment over time, or fluctuate, it isn't even a deposit that currently is off shore and will be brought on shore at the end of time. No, for the one who believes today, they have the stamp of 'RIGHTEOUS' on them, right now, all their sins in the past and all their sins in the future are dealt with.

So the encouragement is that when the Christian, when you or I close my eyes each night, regardless if I've messed up that day, done well or badly in my walk with Christ, I still stand righteous before God regardless.

There's also a warning:

Because it's very easy to start putting our confidence in ourselves and our own performance rather than in God.

So perhaps we look at our lives and think 'do you know what, I'm doing quite well' - I've been a great Christian recently, been helping my relatives when they've been difficult, I'm organising the village fare, I'm helping others out, I've lived in way that honours God. And we can start to put our confidence in those things rather than in Jesus. And we think that those are the reasons God accepts us.

But the problem is that kind of thinking quickly leads to either pride or despair.

It leads to pride because I start to compare myself to others and think I'm better than them. Or I'm better than other Christians.

And it leads to despair because 'what happens when I have a bad day?' What happens when I mess up, and sin and let God down. Well suddenly I'm not sure if he does accept me or not.

No Paul says the place to put your confidence and keep on putting your confidence is Jesus and his death on the cross. That is the only secure foundation for a relationship with God. It keeps me from pride, it keeps me from despair and instead it fills me with thankfulness and assurance.

Righteousness comes through faith not works.

Secondly and more briefly.

2. Righteousness has always come through faith not works.

I wonder if you've ever found yourself thinking or heard others say that it seems like God has one plan in the OT, but then switches to a new plan in the NT.

So in the OT it seems like what God cares about is people works. And so he tells them to do all sorts of sacrifices, and gives them laws to follow, and things like that. And then that kind of goes wrong and people do a bad job of it.

And so in the NT he switches to plan B, which is that people will become righteous through their faith, rather than their works. As if God realised that his standards were slightly too high and so he's changed the assessment?

But these verses show that that is not true.

God's plan was *always* that righteousness would come through faith. Both for people in the OT and the NT.

And these examples of people in the OT like Abraham are concrete proof of that.

*Read v13- It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.*

It's saying that both for Abraham and all who came after him, God's plan was to make them righteous through their faith, not their works.

But why does that matter? Why would it make any difference to us if God *had* chosen to change his mind?

Well think about it this way..

...if God had changed his mind in the past about how people could be saved...then how can I be sure he won't change his mind in the future as well?

What would stop him from saying to us one day 'actually your faith is no longer good enough'?

It's a bit like the terms and conditions for Apple or something like that – it seems like they're always changing! And no one ever reads them, do they?

And you just tick accept and hope that they've not changed anything important.

Well what if God were to one day just change the terms and conditions of our salvation?

Well these verses assure us that God will never do that.

Because he has always had one plan, and one plan only.

From Abraham all the way to 2023.

His plan has been that righteousness comes through faith not works.

And so we can take great comfort in that. God is totally faithful to the things he promises us. He's not like Apple, constantly changing his terms and conditions.

No when he says something he really means it. And he sticks to it.

And so if you have faith in Christ, you have been made righteous by God.

And nothing in the world can change that.