

You would think that in the previous section Paul had made it perfectly clear that we are justified by faith in Christ alone and that we are not justified in any other way. But it's kind of surprising how many people still misunderstand him or think that he means something else when he says that we are justified by faith. We see this happening even among Christians. There's whole church bodies that teach that he means something different, or plenty of Christians out there who simply just don't understand what he's getting at. But in our reading for this evening from Romans chapter 4, Paul wants to correct all of these misunderstandings. And he's using the example of Abraham to do it. Because Abraham himself shows how we are justified by faith. Abraham will be the way to clear up all misunderstanding of what this means.

And so the first misunderstanding that might arise even among Christians is thinking that there's more than one way to be justified. And the reason we might think that is because of some people who do great things for God. There are Christians who work miracles, who follow after God without wavering, who do all kinds of great things. Things they could probably even boast about. Maybe that counts for something. Maybe they are justified by what they do, justified by their works, and the rest of us who haven't done such great things, well, we're just justified by faith, because we have nothing else to go by. And so we think maybe there really is more than one way to be justified.

And I think this happens, even despite what Paul has said, when we look especially at the great saints of the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. There were men who called down fire from heaven. There were men who raised up the dead. There were men who caused droughts to happen or caused it to rain. Worked all kinds of miracles for the sake of God. It would almost seem like they're in a completely different category from the rest of us. Because I know I haven't worked any miracles, and I'm sure none of you have either. So we wonder, are those men and women who did such great things in a different category from the rest of us?

And who could be a better example of this than Abraham? Because think of all the great things that Abraham did. Abraham left his home. He had no idea where he was going. The only thing he had was what God told him to do. That was a very great thing that he did. Abraham was also ready to sacrifice his son Isaac without ever questioning God why. That was also a very great thing that he did. Abraham even haggled with God at one point, trying to convince him to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Also a very great thing that he did. And there were many other things that he did too. All things that he could probably boast about if he really wanted to. Great things that he did for God. So surely Abraham must be justified by his works. Abraham must be justified by what he has done. And the rest of us, well, we're just justified by faith.

But Christians, that's not correct. Abraham is not justified in a different way from us. In fact, Paul quotes Genesis 15 in our reading for today when he says: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." That verse helps us to understand everything that Abraham did. It helps us to understand what the Scriptures are trying to say. And so Genesis says that "Abraham believed God." It doesn't say Abraham had just done something and then all this happened. It does not say "Abraham left his home for God, and it was counted to him for righteousness." That's not what it says. Nor does it say that "Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son Isaac for God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." That's not what it says either. It

says "Abraham believed God." Abraham had faith in God, and that is what was counted as righteousness. His faith brought blessing from the Lord.

Because if that blessing had come by his works, then it would not be a gift, Paul says. Then it would just be something that God owed him, because if you work, you expect to get paid, right? So if this blessing came purely by his works, he would've just earned it, and then faith would've had nothing to do with it. But this blessing came by faith even to Abraham, because as David says in Psalm 32, which Paul quotes here, the blessing comes from being forgiven. The blessing comes from having our sins covered. The blessing comes because the Lord does not count our sins against us. And this blessing also came to Abraham by his faith, so that Abraham was justified by faith just like we are. Because there is only one way to be justified before God.

But a second misunderstanding that comes up pretty frequently, Christians, is thinking that "Well, yes, we have to have faith, but then we have to add something to that faith as well. That faith comes first, that God gives us this faith, and then we have to add something to it, so that faith plus our works is the reason why we are justified." And this actually happens a lot among Christians. This is the great error of Roman Catholicism, to say that faith plus works is the reason why we are justified. Even though they would say it as "faith working through love," it's the same thing. To say that God gives faith and then we add something to it, and that's why we are justified before God. So maybe we need to be circumcised, and then faith will finally count for something. Maybe we need to do something or say something, and then our faith will be justified before the Lord. And in this case, maybe Abraham needed to be circumcised before he could truly be righteous. And maybe we need to do the same, to add something to our faith to really make it count.

But Christians, this isn't right either. Because if that was correct, we would expect God to bless Abraham after he had been circumcised. But in fact, the blessing that Paul is talking about came before Abraham was circumcised. Because Abraham was circumcised in Genesis chapter 17, but the blessing came before, several years earlier, in Genesis chapter 15. So Abraham did not add anything to his faith. God did not bless him only after he had been circumcised. God did not say that he was righteous only after he had done that. Abraham heard the promise that he would be the father of many nations even before he was circumcised, and he believed that promise. And that faith was counted to him as righteousness. So this blessing, this promise, did not come because of what Abraham had done. It did not come through the law, because if it did, then faith would be useless. There'd be no need for it at all. All you would have to do is do the right thing, and then you can work your way into heaven. But the promise, the blessing, depends on faith, and for that reason, it is guaranteed to all who believe. So we are not justified by faith plus something else, by faith plus our works. We are justified by faith alone, just like Abraham was before he was circumcised.

And to make sure that we have no misunderstandings, Paul uses Abraham to show us exactly how he was justified by faith, to show us exactly what it means to be justified by faith. Because God had told him that he would be the father of many nations. But when God told him that promise, he was an old man, about 100 years old as Paul says, as good as dead. As good as dead because his body could no longer produce new life. He was well past the age for fathering children. And Sarah's womb was also dead, as the original language says. It was barren because

she was also well past the age for having children. And so looking at this purely in a human way, it was totally impossible for God to keep his promise. You might as well tell the sun to go down at noon or for water to run uphill, in telling these old people to have the children in their old age. It seemed impossible in the eyes of men.

But Abraham did not consider his own body. He wasn't concerned about what was possible. Abraham believed God, hoping against hope. He knew that God was going to give him a son. Because if God had promised it to him, then God could also do it. And so ignoring his good as dead body, ignoring what was humanly impossible, Abraham trusted in the Lord, knowing that the Lord would give life to the dead, to bring forth life from these good as dead bodies. And that is why his faith was counted as righteousness. Not because it was a super faith, which would turn into a work again, but because that faith held on to the Lord who always keeps his promises. And through that faith, Christians, the Lord made Abraham righteous in his sight.

And all of this is written not just for Abraham. This is also written for us. Because we also are justified by faith, just like Abraham was. And we also believe in the Lord who gives life to the dead, even to Jesus Christ our Lord. Because God raised him from the dead for our justification, raised him up so that we would have life. And when we believe in the risen Lord, when we hold on to him by faith, we are made righteous in the sight of God, just like Abraham. And just like Abraham, we will not be disappointed, because God always does what he says.

So no, Christians, there is not more than one way to be justified, nor are we justified by faith plus something else. We are justified by faith in Christ alone, just like our father Abraham.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have called us to yourself through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to trust in you, knowing that you will do what you say. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.