

Romans

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Romans 4:9-17



Vss. 9-12

- We mentioned last week that in Jewish thought there are three trump cards to play in order to win an argument: Abraham, Moses, and David. In Romans 4:1-8, Paul uses both Abraham and David. Here in verses 9-17 (and through the end of the chapter) he returns to Abraham. He is still here carrying on a conversation with an imaginary Jewish objector and in these short verses crushes his opponent's fortress of The Law.
- It is hard for modern non-Jewish people to understand how vital circumcision was to the ancient Jews and is to many Jews still today. It is THE sign of one's Jewishness. If a Jewish man is not circumcised, he is not a Jew, no matter who his parents are or his family lineage. It was the contractual seal of the covenant with God.
- Paul is able to carry on this imaginary argument because to Paul it wasn't imaginary at all. He had fought this fight in synagogues from Damascus to Ephesus to Corinth, in dozens and dozens, perhaps hundreds of synagogues, so that he could replay the conversation over and over in his head. So having played the Abraham card in the previous verses, Paul knows the next Jewish retort will be, "Yes, I have to agree with all that you say about Abraham and about the fact that it was his complete trust that gained him an entry into a right relationship with God, you will still have to agree that he **was** circumcised!". But in vs. 10 Paul points out that the great patriarch was credited as being righteous before the Lord BEFORE he was circumcised. Abraham received God's blessing in Genesis 15:6 and was not circumcised until some 14 years later in Genesis 17:10. Abraham being credited as righteous by God had absolutely nothing to do with being circumcised and everything to do with the patriarch's faith.
- From this Paul draws two conclusions which he lays out in vss. 11-12. First, because Abraham was made righteous by faith, he is now able to "be the father of all who believe without being circumcised" (vs. 11). Second, Abraham is also able to be father to those who are circumcised but who also follow in Abraham's steps of faith (vs 12). Thus, because it first and foremost by faith and faith's actions that Abraham was credited as righteous by God, he is able to be father to both the Gentile and the Jew.

Vss. 13-17

- In Genesis 12:2-3 God makes a promise to Abraham that He would make the man a blessing to all the families of the earth. God made this promise to Abraham because of his faith, not because he had earned such a blessing by stacking up years of mechanically keeping the Law. To be saved, to receive the inheritance of Abraham's gift from God, would come to us then by the free grace of God and the same perfect kind of faith that Abraham showed, a faith that leads to obedience.

- The Jews still wanted to argue that to inherit this great promise a person must do so by acquiring merit in the sight of God through doing works which the Law prescribes, that he must do it by his own efforts. Paul here points out the two fatal flaws with that. One, that such a belief nullifies faith. In the secular world we live in, it is not unusual to hear someone say that they do not need God to be good. You in fact can pay your taxes, be employee of the month, and a decent spouse, parent, and neighbor without God, so there must be something more than just keeping the Law. Second, when it comes to God's Law, a quick reading of the Old Testament and 2 minutes of personal reflection will show that fully keeping the Law is impossible, no one is able to do so, so following the Jewish line of thought, no one can receive Abraham's inheritance, no one can be saved.

- To sum up, there is faith. It is living each day staking everything on His love. And there is grace. As William Barclay puts it, "A gift of grace is always something which is unearned and undeserved. The truth is that man can never earn the love of God. He must always find his glory, not in what he can do for God, but in what God has done for him. On the other side there is the Law. The trouble about the Law has always been that it can diagnose the sin but cannot offer a cure. The Law shows a person where they have gone wrong but cannot help them to avoid going wrong... There is in fact, as Paul will later stress, a kind of terrible paradox in law. It is human nature that when a thing is forbidden it has a tendency to become desirable. 'Stolen fruits are sweetest.' Law, therefore, can actually move a man to desire the very thing which it forbids. The essential complement of law is judgment, and, so long as a man lives in a religion whose dominant thought is law, he cannot see himself as anything other than a condemned criminal at the bar of God's justice... So Paul sets before the Romans two ways. The one is a way in which a man seeks a right relationship with God through his own efforts. It is doomed to failure. The other is a way in which a man enters by faith into a relationship with God, which by God's grace already exists for him..."