

“Hearts Afire”

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Romans 4:1-5; 13-17

“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?

2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God.

3 What does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.’

4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.

5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” ***

“13 It was not through 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.

14 For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless,

15 because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

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 to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

17 As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’ He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.”

Hearts Afire

In preparation for today’s sermon, I revisited an old question. Why did God pick Abraham of all people? If you read in Genesis 12, Abraham just pops onto the scene like we already knew him. All the commentaries I could lay my hands on had no direct detailed answer to my question of God’s choice.

They all seemed to make the bold (and correct) assumption that God knew Abraham's mind and that he would be a man of great faith. Proof of this is in the fact that God did choose him and Abraham proved his worthiness. One book on my shelf is *The Bible for Dummies*. I looked up Abraham and why God chose him and it says, "Just because!"

In Abraham's day, there was no Torah with all its laws. Therefore, Paul, being the educated Pharisee that he was, was certainly aware of this lack of rules and regulations in Abraham's time. So, Paul was using Abraham as a model of faith. And he was trying to make the point that Abraham was not just the father of the Jews in the flesh, but of all people of faith. Our scripture today makes no bones about it; according to Paul, Abraham had discovered something. It had to do with this term, "Justified" which I sometimes stumble over.

For those who are familiar with placing printed text on a page, we say the text is 'justified to the left' or to the right or to the center. In other words, the text is conformed to fit the page and to fit as the operator wishes.

So, in a theological sense, does that over-simplify things? Words on a page? The operator decides what he/she wants and makes it to fit.

Perhaps he looks at the hand-written draft first and sees the potential as to how the text will look when it fits and that's what happens.

But we are different than scribbled words on a handwritten note. Words have no choice. We are given a choice. God's justification, His love, is not forced on us. Those of faith will choose correctly. But, we can make ourselves *appear* to be justified by adhering to the law, saying we fit within

a certain set of legal boundaries like words fit a page. Justification by law goes all the way back to the times of Moses.

Our scripture mentions the word, 'Credit.' In Deuteronomy, there is much to be said about the concept of credit as it pertains to loans and debts. It was a hard-fisted, strict concept made to keep people in line. This hard-fisted concept was also used to mold people into a model of acceptable total behavior.

We still do the same thing today, in a way. When we buy a house, we speak of a financial deposit, prior to the final sale. I have heard it referred to as 'earnest money.' Really? What does the word, 'earnest' mean anyway? Synonyms are words like sincere, heartfelt, or impassioned. What it really is, is a legal, financial requirement to keep both parties honest. In that sense, we still live by the laws of Deuteronomy.

Our scripture speaks of a man earning his wages for his work. Let me ask you, do you know of anyone who works hard for only meager wages? Why do we hear of talented people who die in poverty? Do our wages really reflect what we are worth? I can tell you that no one gets what they are worth. Rather, we get what we can negotiate and it depends on how convincing you are and how badly the hiring manager wants you. Wages are of a contractual nature, either verbal or written. Why contractual? It is so no one person in the contract can be dishonest with the other. It is agreement saying that an amount of work will be compensated for with an amount of wages. Both parties are prospecting the earthly question, "What's in it for me?"

In the OT times, among the primitive people who lived back then, there was a dire need for rules that guided behavior, protected society and prevented chaos. Since the dawn of civilization when humans began living in groups, there has been the need for such rules. And because God gave these rules to the people, they believe their justification and their fit, could be found within the boundaries of just following the rules. Then faith came along and that was a new concept that uprooted their way of thinking. For so long, they had been stuck on the idea of justification as being something 'earned' by strict adherence to the rules. Even today, think how hard it is to turn away from our self-gratifying, rule-following tendencies and lean on faith. Consider a sporting event. There are rules to make the game fair, safe, and interesting. In short, there are reasons for the rules. Try playing a pro football game on faith without rules! You do not get points for being safe, or fair, or interesting. But, in justifying us, God asks us to look beyond the words of the laws and find the heart of the law.

My maternal grandfather, Vernon Hartwig, was an educated man, an educator himself, and steeped in the knowledge of classic literature. If the topic came up about classic poetry, we knew better than to mention the poem "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley. Henley had endured some unthinkable hardships. The poem mentions, "...whatever gods may be..." and ends with the words, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." My mother had warned me of Pop's complete disdain for those words. Do they exclude God? Are they self-justifying? Are they really the heart of the matter?

Pop had no problem with self-help, boot strap psychology, but he would always remind us that God was the engine, the driver and we were the ones who engaged in the process of finding the heart of the truth. He was the principal of a small, country town school where many kids came to school barefoot until the first frost. He and my grandmother were both teachers and they lived in an old frame house on the school property where he did his own plumbing, his own house repairs, raised chickens and a huge garden. He could have looked for a better job in a big city, but he felt a calling to help impoverished kids think better of themselves and each other. There was no law saying he should be there. Just a matter of the heart. If you have had great success with anything worthwhile, perhaps you should wonder why God equipped you to do it. Pop's answer to that question became apparent to us after he died; there was standing room only at his funeral. He was where God, not laws, intended him to be.

Have you ever looked at the Ten Commandments and wondered, "Didn't they already know this stuff?" God reveals Himself in stages throughout the bible, as Paul is trying to explain. I once saw a cartoon of Moses coming down off the mountain carrying only one stone tablet. I am sure you have the signs in our Fellowship Hall with carefully crafted words that say, "Thank you for not smoking." Or perhaps you have seen others like, "Thank you for driving within our speed limit." Well, Moses has this one stone tablet that says, "Thank you for not sinning." Moses is looking up and the caption reads, "Say, boss, I think you need to lean on these folks a little harder!" So, God knew that a simple loving suggestion was not going to be enough at that moment in time and the rules flowed forth from that point.

The folks back in Moses' time saw the order and civility that came from these rules, so they decided to start adding more – and more to cover every possible thing. The result was the Talmud; what I call the Jewish Book of order. Don't look for it in the bible, it's not there. Sometimes laws bring wrath, as our scripture lesson says, because they require enforcement and because not everyone agrees with them. Wrath, because we follow the rules as we are forced to and not because we want to.

Sometimes we make up our own rules; rules that apply to ourselves alone; our own little lame plan of justification. We may set a rule that we will do a single, good deed each day and that gives a positive spin on the whole day. We are good to go for the next 24 hours! The rest of the day is not in question. It is like eating poorly all day and taking a vitamin at bedtime just to be safe.

But God did not forget the loving suggestion that first started in the garden. He kept that card in reserve and Jesus played that card.

Another word comes out of our lesson that goes hand-in-hand with 'justified.' That word is 'righteousness.' There are righteous acts and righteous people. In Deuteronomy, there are verses that speak of making a loan to a poor, cold man and not taking his cloak as collateral. Such a thing is referred to as a righteous act.

How many of you have seen the movie, *Schindler's List*? In it, Schindler saved the lives of hundreds, thousands of captured Jews. At the end of the movie, some details were mentioned about the real-life Oskar Schindler. We were told that some years after the war, the Nation of Israel designated

him as a “Righteous Person” and planted a tree in his memory. Was he always a righteous person? If you saw the movie, you know about his prodigal behavior. But, something moved him to do the righteous things he did. My grandfather was a flawed man as we all are, but he listened to God. Was Abraham always a righteous person? If you read all about him in Genesis, you will know he was far from perfect. However, the things these men did were righteous acts and done without thought of reward. What prompted them to perform righteous acts? There was no rule that required what they did. But, there was justification by God. Justification, that loving suggestion I mentioned earlier was there, implanted in our spiritual DNA and moving us to do things that amaze even ourselves. God looks at us, the way He made us, and sees that we have the potential to fit – not on a page, but into his kingdom. Righteousness is to accept God’s justification, even if we do not understand it. It requires trust.

It gives us no occasion to boast, because the tipping point for boasting did not come from us, but from God. If we boast of anything, it is that God has made us, all of us, to fit the page. We accept it on absolute faith, not as a shopping choice or as something we contrived. We should speak of it in amazement, in the joy of catching a glimpse of God’s kingdom.

That idea of one good deed per day or just following the rules – perhaps that is saying, “I don’t need your Grace. I’ve got my own justification.”

So, if following the rules exactly is not enough, what lies deeper in this process? When I was in the 8th grade, my dad was stationed at Keesler AFB in Biloxi, MS. I played snare drum in the school marching band. We

had been invited to march in a Mardi Gras parade in Gretna, LA. Each band member had been doing his/her own practice and we knew the music inside and out. But the director was disappointed when we came together to practice as a band. We were two lines into the first number and he stopped us. “No,” he said, “You’re not doing it right! Try again – from the top!” So, we started over and the same thing happened. After about three or four attempts, one of the seniors asked him what was wrong. There had been no missed notes, the timing was perfect and everything was in tune. He answered, “This music is for a celebration, for Mardi Gras! When you march by, I want to see people on the sidewalk get up and dance! Put your hearts into it! Don’t just play the notes!” And so we took it from the top again and again until we had discovered the heart of the music. And when we marched in Gretna, people on the sidewalk danced.

The Pharisees knew the rules. They practiced the rules. They knew the letter of the law, but not the heart of the law. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus tells us we need to be more righteous than the Pharisees if we expect to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

So, let’s go back to the question of what Abraham discovered. He discovered God’s will in his heart and was considered righteous because he followed it. Schindler looked upon the massacre of Jews and felt God’s will stirring within him – and he followed it. Vernon Hartwig saw poor, rural farm kids and felt God leading him.

The power of God's will in your heart has a name; GRACE. It is His gift of justification and the choice is ours. We follow laws because we must. We follow his grace because we choose to.

What's stirring in your heart today?

Amen.