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Romans 4:1-12

Eighth Message

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# THE DEATH BLOW TO PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

In Romans 3, Paul brought us to the heart of the gospel when he demonstrated how man is justified by faith alone in Christ alone. If we believe in this gospel, we can make three statements: "I am justified. I am redeemed. And God is satisfied." Paul ended the chapter with three implications for our lives that come as a result of our belief. The gospel ends our pride. It destroys our prejudice. And it fulfills the Law.

In chapter 4, Paul illustrates these three propositions with the life of Abraham. Whenever we say that people are justified by faith in Christ alone, someone always objects, "What about the person who has lived a good life full of good works—someone like Ghandi?"

When I attended Stanford University, the residence advisor in my fraternity was a young man whose name even spoke of purity. When he smiled, his pearly white teeth glowed from ear to ear. He was dedicated to the good life. He was always optimistic, never depressed, and diligent in his studies. As a result, he became our symbol of the man who could justify his life by his good deeds. Many came to believe the illusion that if they gave up their drunkenness and immorality they too could become like him.

He was even tested in his goodness. The big challenge was to get him drunk, but the schemes never succeeded. I found out later that he always carried a large boot which he would stash under the table at any party or bar. While his fraternity brothers were busy refilling his glass on top of the table, he was slyly emptying it under the table. Everyone else experienced the usual hangovers, but he would wake up chipper as a spring bird and smile upon them all.

He was indeed the symbol of the good life. Even Christians were deceived. I remember one young Christian saying, "I wonder if Christ really is the only way. After all, look at this guy." But one day, the unthinkable happened. When he and his girlfriend broke up, our friend went on a drinking spree. I will never forget that evening. He came in so drunk he got sick all over the rest-room. The next morning a gloom descended upon the fraternity because he had fallen from his pedestal. The illusion was broken.

What happened to my friend is what the apostle Paul proves about Abraham. In Rabbinic literature, Abraham was the supreme example of someone who could be saved by his merit, someone who had a right to boast in his good works before God. But Paul uses the Old Testament to prove the opposite to be true, that Abraham could not boast about his works.

In fact, in chapter 4, Paul will use Abraham to illustrate every proposition he made in the previous chapter. The death blow to pride is seen in the first eight verses. The death blow to prejudice is seen in verses 9 through 12. And his third proposition about the fulfillment of the Law is seen in the remainder of the chapter. We will concentrate on the first two propositions in this message and the last one in the next message.

Let us first look at the death blow which deals with pride.

## I. Abraham's Faith: The Death Blow to Pride (4:1-8)

**What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? (Rom 4:1 NASB)**

The word "find" does not refer to what Abraham might have discovered but to what he obtained. It is used in Genesis in phrases such as, "Noah found grace in the eyes of God."

Of all the righteous people in the Old Testament, none surpassed Abraham. God speaks of him in Isaiah as "Abraham, my friend." And Genesis 26:5 says, "Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." Thus, the rabbis used his life as an example of one who had a right to boast in his own good works before God. One rabbi said of him, "Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life." Another rabbi wrote, "We find that Abraham our father had performed the whole Law before it was given, for it is written, 'Because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws (Gen. 26:5).' He was one of the righteous ones not needing repentance."

What did Abraham obtain? Paul gives us the answer in verses 2-5:

**For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.**

Paul says there are two roads to justification. If a man can be justified by works, then God owes him righteousness. It is not a gift; it is earned as a wage. If we can earn righteousness, God is in our debt and must pay what he owes. On the other hand, if we are justified by faith apart from works of Law, righteousness is not owed but bestowed. It is a gift. Thus, justification is either a gift or a wage, not both.

Which road did Abraham take? Paul finds the answer in Genesis 15. Let us look at the verses preceding this quote in order to catch the context. Abraham requested that God give him an heir in verse 2:

**And Abram said, "O LORD God, what wilt Thou give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Since Thou hast given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body [inward parts], he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants [seed] be." Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15:2-6)**

The rabbis used this last verse to say that Abraham's faith was actually a work which merited righteousness. One rabbi quotes God as saying to Moses when he parted the sea, "The faith with which your father Abraham believed in Me merits that I should divide the sea for you, as it is written: 'He believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness.'" But Paul disagrees with this interpretation. He says that faith has no value except in its object. Therefore, a person cannot even boast about his faith, for it is a gift as well.

Paul's shows that Abraham had no works. Instead, he believed in God, the One who justifies the ungodly. His belief in the promise of God to bring about a supernatural gift of a seed which would be the Messiah is what justified him. When God came to him and made a promise, Abraham put his faith in that promise. As a result, he was reckoned righteous.

The fact that Paul says Abraham believed in him "who justifies the ungodly" reveals that he thought Abraham had no works to count on. Indeed, Abraham was ungodly at times and needed forgiveness. Paul would say to the rabbis, "You have not read the text correctly. Look at Abraham's life!" During the first half of his life, Abraham was an idol worshiper in Ur of the Chaldees. Then after God brought him to the promised land, he tested him to see if he would have faith. When he caused a famine in the land, Abraham fled in fear to Egypt. There he almost caused his wife to commit adultery with Pharaoh before God intervened. Twenty years later, he repeated the same sin. Then Ishmael was born, the Rambo of the Old Testament. Abraham took great delight in this young hunter, for he was earthy and a man's man. When God said Isaac was to be his seed of promise, Abraham responded, "Oh that Ishmael would live before you!" This was Abraham—an idolator, a fearful man, a man willing to compromise his own wife, a man who trusted the flesh more than the Spirit. Clearly the rabbis have not read the text closely enough!

I sometimes struggle with biographies of Christian leaders for the same reason. Often the person being remembered comes across as ideal and sinless. Before any biography is published, the wife should edit it and add her views. It would certainly help us gain a proper perspective on a man's life.

Abraham was a man who needed forgiveness. He was justified by faith apart from any works of the Law. In fact, all of his good works were a result of his belief in the promise of God. They were a result of his faith, not the means of his justification.

To further illustrate his point, Paul moves from Abraham, the greatest patriarch, to David, the most exemplary king. If the rabbis missed the point with Abraham, there would be no mistake made in the case of David. Paul supports his view from Psalm 32 which was written just after this great king committed adultery and murder. He certainly could not be justified by his works. Look at verses 6-8:

**Just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:**

**"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven,  
And whose sins have been covered,  
Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."**

The verbal link between this text and Genesis 15 is the word "reckon." Thus, Paul is interpreting one text in light of the other. What David did is horrifying. David had been leading a life of victory until he committed these major sins. He had been conquering God's

enemy. Then 2 Samuel 11 records, "In the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle...David stayed at Jerusalem."

That was his first mistake. Then he took a nap and woke up filled with lustful thoughts. While wandering about his rooftop, he spied a woman bathing. He used his office as king to seduce her, and she conceived. Then he used it again to get Uriah her husband, who was risking his life fighting the king's battles, to return home to be with his wife. Uriah refused, saying, "How can I be with my wife when the Ark of the Covenant is on the battlefield?" David then used his office a third time to put Uriah on the front lines where he could be killed (others were killed as well). The affair was successfully covered up until David's friend Nathan, a prophet, pointed the finger of blame.

Yet it is at this point that David said he received a blessing. In other words, he received the blessing of life when he understood how depraved his heart was. In Psalm 32, he uses four nouns to describe his wickedness. First he says he was a "transgressor." This Hebrew word means "to do what should not be done." To transgress is to cross over God's boundaries in a high-handed way. Thus, murder and adultery were high-handed sins against God's absolutes.

Then David describes himself as a "sinner." Sin is the opposite of transgression. It means "to not do what should be done." David said, "As king, I should have gone to battle with my men. And I should have enhanced Uriah's marriage with his wife Bathsheba."

Then he uses "iniquity" to describe his sin. This refers to making the straight paths or highways of God crooked. It speaks not only of the act of ruining good things, but also of living with the resulting guilt and consequences of the perversion. David freely admits, "I am a pervert. I used my office as king to commit adultery. And I used the institution of holy war for my own murder scheme." Many religious leaders today should be saying the same thing! David perverted the right things and used them for his own ends.

But the most amazing admission of all is found in the next line of Psalm 32 which Paul does not quote: "How blessed is the man... in whose spirit there is no deceit!" When he looked into the depths of his own heart, David saw that there was nothing there but deceit and that his heart was so wicked it could not be content until he had carried out his plan of malice, greed, adultery and murder. All of his actions were motivated by deceit even though all the circumstances resisted him. Have you seen this deceit in your own heart?

When this realization came upon David, it produced in him a broken and contrite spirit. The road to blessing is the highway that breaks our hearts. As Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." When we come to this realization and see how wicked our hearts are, then we have taken the first step to blessing.

The problem today is that no one is confessing wickedness. There is no repentance like David's. His repentance was even public—in the temple! As king, he would have presented a sacrifice and would have publicly admitted what he did when the people gathered together for worship. This is true confession, repentance, humility and brokenness.

The highway of brokenness leads to the blessing of God's grace. In the same Psalm, David also uses four verbs to describe how God handles sin and how he blesses man. First, he says God "forgave" the transgression. This Hebrew word (the root means, "to lift") speaks of our need to have the weight of guilt lifted off of our hearts and

placed upon someone else. David found that God took the guilt which was weighing upon him and destroying his life and placed it upon his Son. That is forgiveness.

Then David says God “covered” his sins. This word deals with our need for acceptance before a holy God. What did Adam and Eve do when they sinned? They used fig leaves to cover themselves because they felt naked. Why were they naked? Because of their sin, they were stripped of their robes of righteousness. Therefore, they could no longer stand before the holy God. The fig leaves symbolize man’s attempt to cover his sin. But God says this is not adequate. Man’s religious efforts will not work. Instead, God slaughtered an animal in order to clothe them with the righteousness only he can provide. As my friend Bob Smith says, God said to Eve, “You don’t need a fig leaf, you need a fur coat!” With God’s fur coat of righteousness, provided through the shedding of innocent blood, man can stand accepted in God’s presence because his sin is covered.

Then David says God does not “impute” iniquity. This word deals with our need for freedom from the ensuing condemnation. Condemnation is not just the sentence of guilt brought on by sin; it is also the sentence of slavery. Sin becomes our taskmaster once we have submitted to it. David was amazed that instead of receiving condemnation and slavery, he was given freedom. Sin was no longer his master.

But the most amazing thing to me is the last line. David says, “Blessed is the one in whose spirit there is no deceit.” In Psalm 51, he prayed a remarkable prayer: “Lord, create in me a new heart.” He knew that he could never reform his heart through his own efforts. He could not send it to reform school or Alcoholics Anonymous. Nor could he send it to a seminar for self-improvement. Deceit had rotted the very core of his heart. What had to happen was the same miracle which happened when God created the heavens and the earth by his word. Light came out of darkness and order out of chaos! Without that same creative word, there would be no change in David’s heart. He found that after he had confessed his sin and repented he had a new heart by a divine miracle. He was not only forgiven and reinstated, accepted and free, he was regenerated! He was given a new heart capable of responding to God through the Spirit. This is all recorded in the Old Testament!

Yesterday I taught one of the workshops at the Quest for Sexual Identity Seminar. During the seminar, John White told about his own experience with molestation and the damage that left on his soul. Much of the day was spent uncovering the pain in our lives caused by the sins we have chosen or by being victim to someone else’s sin. In my workshop, one girl asked, “Given the destruction to the soul and the residue that sin leaves, how much healing can we expect from God?” I took her to this text and told her that David says he received a blessing even though he had just committed murder and adultery.

Do you know what the Hebrew word “blessing” means? It does not mean “happy”. This word actually refers to living life to its fullest potential as the Creator designed it to be lived before the Fall. God’s blessing means that when he restores us he gives us life as it was intended to be. This is good news! This blessing finds its ultimate fulfillment in the new heavens and new earth, but the process begins now.

Do you realize that the very thing which David learned about himself is what qualified him as a preacher of the gospel. In Psalm 32, he says, “I am now adequate to teach sinners about your way, O

God.” It grieves me to see so many churches listing certain sins as disqualifying factors for eldership. It is true that elders must have high qualifications, but sometimes a man’s past is not a clear indicator of his present spiritual maturity. Some say that divorce disqualifies a man forever from serving as an elder. I reply, “Look at David! The man was a murderer and adulterer, but he stood in the temple teaching God’s people. He had authority to teach because he had repented and learned of God’s grace.” That is full restoration.

In our day, the problem is the lack of repentance. God is in the business of healing, but in order for redemption to take us out of our wicked past and restore us, we must have the same broken and contrite spirit David had.

When we look at Abraham and David, we are not looking at men who were justified by works of Law. They were justified by faith apart from works. Neither was blameless or could boast. Both speak of God’s full blessing as a gift even in the face of a tragic record. I hope the examples of faith which you admire are not deceptive. I hope they glory in God’s grace which they have found in the midst of their own depravity.

Thus, Paul deals a death blow to pride by showing us the lives of Abraham and David. Now we need to look at the second proposition—prejudice. Look at verse 9-12.

## II. Abraham’s Faith: The Death Blow to Prejudice (4:9-12)

**Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.**

Circumcision was a major issue in Paul’s day. Many Jewish Christians were telling Gentile Christians that besides having faith they had to become Jews. They were saying that unless a Gentile was circumcised as the sign of the Old Covenant he could not enjoy God’s covenant promises.

Was the blessing upon the circumcised or the uncircumcised? In his answer, Paul asks two questions: When was Abraham declared righteous, and what is the significance of circumcision? The answer to the first is that Abraham was reckoned righteous fourteen years before he was circumcised. Therefore, circumcision did not add anything to that righteous status.

Secondly, circumcision was not a means of justification. Rather, it was the external seal of the righteous standing Abraham already possessed. It did not create anything new. It did not enhance that righteous status in any way. This same principle can be seen in regard to wedding rings. When I made my vows to my wife fifteen years ago, I put a wedding ring on my finger. That ring by itself does not make me married or cause me to remain loyal to her. It is merely the seal of the internal vows I gave to my wife.

Prejudice always comes about when you narrow God’s love to a circle that only includes a select group of people based upon external characteristics such as heritage, status or sex. Because prejudice runs

deep, the way to eliminate it is to put everyone in the same family with the put everyone in the same family with the same father. When people have the same parent, there is no room for prejudice. Imagine telling Hitler he was a Jew!

This is what God did to eliminate prejudice in his kingdom. He gave everyone the same father. Abraham is the father of the Gentiles who believe by virtue of the fact that he was justified before he was circumcised. He was a Gentile before he became a Jew. But he is also the father of the Jews who believe because he received the sign of circumcision after he was justified. Any Jew who was the physical seed of Abraham could be also a son of Abraham if he believed.

This is an important point. Circumcision by itself is meaningless. If you have it, you must still believe. If you do not have it, you must still believe. It does not add anything whatsoever. In fact, this is the argument Jesus gave the Jews when they protested that they were the sons of Abraham. He said, "You think you are the sons of Abraham? You are the sons of the devil because you are doing the deeds of the devil and you do not have the faith of Abraham."

But do you see God's genius in destroying our prejudice? We are all in one family with one father. There is no distinction based upon age, class or sex. We are all saved by the blood of Christ alone. This is why it is a serious offense to make any external ritual the basis for higher standing in the church, whether it be baptism, spiritual gifts, or background. In fact, Paul says, "I hope the knife slips on those who want you to be circumcised while they are being circumcised! I wish they would castrate themselves."

This is why our church does not have membership. We do not want to create any external basis upon which a hierarchy within this family might be established. We are all here by the blood of Christ. The flesh is very subtle and loves to create hierarchies through external means.

I had a friend whose daughter was dating a young man from a denomination which taught that a person had to be baptized in water in order to be saved. Because this daughter had not been baptized yet, the young man was pressuring her because he was worried about her salvation. Wisely, the father refused his permission because he wanted the young man to see the reality of the Spirit in his daughter's life apart from baptism. After the lesson was learned by the young man, then the father allowed her to be baptized out of obedience to Christ.

Lest there be any doubt that any of us can boast in our good works, we see that both Abraham and David were justified by faith alone. Then we also see that the example of Abraham's life buries all of our prejudices. May we leave them in the grave!

I exhort you to consider these two areas in your own life. What kind of an example do you give the world? When the world looks at you, do they see someone who boasts in his or her achievements and talents? Or do they see someone whose boast is in the cross of Christ alone?

Second, how wide is the circle of your love when the world looks at you and your friendships? If they could view your table at Thanksgiving, would they see it confined to your own physical seed or to certain people with financial status? Or do they see an international community of all races, young and old, hurting and healthy? This is what Abraham would ask of us today. We are to destroy our pride and bury our prejudice.

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