

Our Faith and God's Law

Romans 4:1, 13-17
February 12, 2023

First Presbyterian Church
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Reflecting on the faith of Abraham, sidewalk preacher Mike Stockwell recalls that “many of us were raised with the idea that in order to please God we have to try to be good and hope at the end our good stuff outweighs the bad...” “Trouble is, we’re never really sure how ‘good’ good really is. Is God just sitting up there waiting to (confront) me at the end? How do I know [God] is pleased with me?”¹

This is an age-old question that we’ve been struggling with since the beginning, going all the way back to the Garden of Eden when God tossed us out of paradise for being bad. Then along comes Abraham and Sarah, through whom God gives us a chance to get it right, to enter the Promised Land, by turning from the defiance that led Adam and Eve astray. Adam and Eve refused to obey God. They took what was not theirs – the fruit of the tree at the center of the garden. Abraham and Sarah did what God asked of them. They left their home to go where God would lead them, all the way to the promised land, a land of milk and honey (Gen. 17:8; Ex 3:17). So, how do we stay on course to the promised land? How do we stay in God’s good graces?

This is exactly what Paul is showing us in today’s New Testament lesson, as he examines our faith and God’s law. Paul asks, “What ... are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh?” Here, Paul is not talking about gaining a place in the Promised Land. He’s talking about learning how to act by being more like Abraham.

Abraham is known for obeying God no matter what. God says sacrifice that which he loves the most and Abraham obeys. God says leave everything behind and follow me, and Abraham obeys. God says Abraham and Sarah will have a child in their old age, and Abraham starts shopping for a crib. The man trusts and obeys God in all things.

And here’s Paul. Paul has spent his life learning the Law of God and following it to the letter. A Pharisee among Pharisees, he calls himself. And still Paul knows that he’s not perfect, that he does wrong in the eyes of God, just like we all do.

¹Abraham’s faith and the resurrection, “mikestockwell.com, May 16, 2013, <http://mikestockwell.com>.

Later in Romans (7:15-20 - CEV), Paul says, "I don't understand why I act the way I do. I don't do what I know is right. I do the things I hate. Although I don't do what I know is right, I agree that the Law is good."

Have you ever felt that way? You know what's right, but you don't do it; you do just the opposite. We all have. Everyone has done something at some point and then immediately you knew it was wrong – whether that's lashing out at a family member, telling a boldfaced lie, taking something that doesn't belong to you, passing by someone in need when you could have helped – all kinds of ways we fall short and do wrong. Not to mention all the things we could be doing to better show our love of God and neighbor, which is the Law of God.

The Law of God is pretty simple, and we turn our back on it every day. We can't help it. As Paul says, "I know that my selfish desires won't let me do anything that is good. Even when I want to do right, I cannot. Instead of doing what I know is right, I do wrong." Where is the hope for anyone like that; where is the hope for us and this fallen world of ours? If following the Law of God is all that will save us, we are lost.

Thankfully, Paul assures us that it's not about following the Law, but rather it's about living a life of faith, that's the starting point; that's the key to our survival. "The promise that (Abraham) would inherit the world" says Paul, "did not come to (him) or to his descendants" – to us – "through the law but through the righteousness of faith." Faith is what really matters.

So what about the law? What use is the Law of God or the laws of society? I mean, Paul makes it pretty clear that those who follow the law for the law's sake gain nothing. This means that it's not our legal system that's going to turn things around in this country. It's not the rule of law that's going to make this world a safer place. No, something else is needed. The law is important, but something else is needed.

A Drug Enforcement agent (DEA) arrived at a ranch in Texas telling the old rancher that he needed to search his property for illegal drugs. The rancher said, "Sure, but just don't go into that field over there." This made the DEA agent suspicious. "Look, mister," he said, pulling his badge. "I have the full authority of the federal government behind me. I'll go anywhere on your ranch that I want!" The rancher nodded and went back to his chores. Moments later he heard loud screams. Looking up, he saw the DEA agent running for his life, being chased by the rancher's bull. As the bull started gaining on him, the agent yelled to the rancher for help. The rancher cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled back, "Your badge! Show him your badge!"

The law is important, but something else is needed. Paul has an interesting and more powerful view of the law and its purpose in this world. The main function of the law – in God’s eyes – is to give rise to the very thing that we need in order to live a good life and make the world a better place. And that is grace.

“... Where there is no law,” says Paul, there is no violation. And the proper response to a violation of the law, is the grace of God. As Paul says, being worthy of the Promised Land does not depend on doing good, but rather on faith. “... It depends on faith,” says Paul, “in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all”

In other words, we all stand before God as sinners, sinners who are loved and forgiven only by the grace of God. So if you’ve ever wondered which is more important – doing good or having faith – now you know. Faith is most important. But not just any faith. Paul calls for the righteousness of faith. Faith is our belief in God; righteousness is our response to that faith, the actions that our faith gives rise to.

Today is Scout Sunday, when we celebrate all the good that scouting brings to this world. The foundation of scouting is the Scout Law: A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. Those are the actions that scouting gives rise to. Without those actions, the Scout Law is nothing, just empty words.

Well, it’s the same with our faith. We may say we believe in God, but where are the actions that show our faith? We may say we’re a community of faith, but where is the grace that shows our love of God and neighbor?

As the Protestant reformer Martin Luther said, “Good works do not make a good (person), but a good (person) does good works.” So let your faith guide your actions. And remember, if anyone has wronged you, the godly response is grace, the same grace through which you are loved and forgiven by God, the same grace that ensures we will all make it to the Promised Land, as God uses us to make this world a true reflection of his love for us and all people. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

How grateful we are for this house of worship and this place of prayer. Some of us came to church dragging our feet, and some of us arrived skipping. Some of us came joyfully singing, and some of us cannot even hear the music. Some of us came with hearts so heavy we can barely breathe, and some of us are so exhilarated we can hardly catch our breath.

We pray your spirit of healing and strength upon all those dealing with illness and disease, loneliness and grief, scarcity and want. And for us, O Lord, grant us the grace to listen to you and others with open hearts and open minds, and give us the courage to be brave, to reach out with one hand to you and the other to those who need a helping hand, a calming touch, a quiet voice, a listening ear.

And may we depart after worship as a people renewed in our faith and filled with hope, because all things are possible through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**