

Intro: The week after next I will be taking a class entitled "Legal Issues and the Pastor." In preparation, I've been reading a textbook by a Christian attorney, Carl Lansing, Legal Defense Handbook for Christians in Ministry. One section that was eye-opening had to do with contract laws. Do you know what the "parole evidence rule" is? I didn't prior to this book. The rule is this: "When the parties to a contract express their agreement in writing with the intent that it embodies the full and final expression of their agreement, any other oral statements or promises made prior to or contemporaneous with the signing will not be allowed in court to alter or modify the written terms of that contract (191)." What does that mean? In short, once you sign a written contract that says that it is the 'complete and final agreement', that written contract supersedes every verbal promise the other person made to you.

Here's an example of how the "parole evidence rule" can be used against us (Lansing's example, p. 192). Suppose I want to buy a computer system. In my research I meet with five salespeople from five different computer firms. All of the spend hours telling me how great their computer is. "It will do this, and this, and this!" Then it's time to make the purchase. Guess what the salesperson does? He brings out a written contract. I scan through it and see these words, "Disclaimer of Warranties." The written disclaimer sounds very different from the verbal boasts the seller made moments earlier. The fine print stated that in all reality virtually nothing is guaranteed! The fine print reads (and I'm overstating!), "This computer might not even turn on once you buy it!"

The bottom line is this. What do I believe, the boasts of the salesperson or the written contract? The "parole evidence rule" says that the final written contract I signed cancels out every promise that salesperson made to me.

No wonder people are skeptical today. They're skeptical of salespeople. They're skeptical of preachers, too. When Bob flips through the channels on his TV Sunday morning and hears, "God has a great plan for your life. Write to me, and I'll help you discover that wonderful plan," Bob's thinks, "Sure! I wonder what that guy on the screen really wants. What he says sounds too good to be true! What's in the fine print?"

How do you help someone who thinks the gospel sounds too good to be true? We'll find out this morning in Romans 4.

Last week, in the first eight verses of Romans 4, we found two case studies in faith--the first is Abraham (1-5), and the second is David (6-8). These case studies verify the point made in Romans 3--we are justified with God by faith, not merit. In the first case study, Paul highlights Abraham to reveal two important lessons. One is that our works may impress men, but not God (2). The second is that we are justified (declared right with God) by imputation, not perspiration (3-5). That is, imputation is

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the activity of God, is the result of grace, and is realized by faith. From the second case study, David, we learn two more lessons. The first is that God's favor must be received, not earned (6). The second is similar--God's forgiveness must we received, not earned (7-8). God's forgiveness is possible because of imputation. At the cross, God imputed our sin to Christ, and He imputed Christ's righteousness to us.

In short, God offers to us what we could never attain on our own. In the words of the chorus, "He paid a debt He did not owe. I owed a debt I could not pay. I needed someone to wash my sins away. But now I sing a brand new song, amazing grace. Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay."

Does that sound too good to be true? Throughout history, many have thought so. Such was the case in Paul's day. Paul ministered to Jewish people who said, "Believe in Jesus in order to be right with God? That's all? That's Ok, but it's not enough. What about our Jewish rites, like circumcision? And what about the Law? Are you saying that we can be right with God without being circumcised and without keeping the Jewish ritual we've had for 14 centuries? Paul, what you are preaching sounds too good to be true. What's in the fine print?!"

How did Paul respond to such accusations? In Rom 4:9-12, he said, "Does justification by faith alone sound too good to be true? You want to check the fine print? Ok, here's the fine print."

Proposition: In Romans 4:9-12, Paul explains the "fine print" of justification by faith, and clarifies two important questions.

- I. Question #1: Who can be right with God? (9)
- II. Question #2: When does a person become right with God? (10-12)
 - A. Consider the possibilities (10).
 1. Through religious activity
 2. Apart from religious activity
 - B. Consider the pattern (11a).
 1. Abraham had faith.
 2. Abraham received the sign of faith.
 - C. Consider the principles (11b-12).
 1. Gentiles are saved the same way Abraham was.
 2. Jews must be saved the same way Abraham was.

Implications: What must I do?

1. I do not need to add to what God has done.
2. I must accept what God has done.
3. I must live in light of what God has done.

I. Question #1: Who can be right with God? (9)

V 9 "Cometh this blessedness, then, upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also?" Frankly, this is perhaps the most tedious and difficult sections we've seen in Romans thus far. What's Paul getting at? In short, in ch 4 he's dealing with objections to the doctrine of justification by faith. Here's the first objection. Who can be right with God?

The word "blessedness" points back to case study #2. In v 6, Paul says David experienced "blessedness." David experienced the contentment of knowing all was well between him and God. Paul knew what his Jewish critic was thinking, "Wait a minute Paul. David was a Jew. He was our greatest king. He was also circumcised." Paul anticipated this objection in v 9. That's why he asked, "Who can experience this blessedness? Only circumcised Jews? Or is it available to non-circumcised Gentiles, too?"

How did Paul answer? V 9 "For we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness." Paul looked back past David to Abraham again. What happened to Abraham? Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness (NIV). How was Abraham saved? Was it by perspiration, by religious activity? No. By imputation.

There's that word again. Paul mentions "imputation" 11 times in this chapter (the English words "count," "reckon," and "impute"). Why does he repeat the same truth over and over? For two reasons. One, is because it's so important. The second is because we are so slow to get it! We are born with this engrained notion that the righteousness of God is something we must attain, earn, and merit. It is not. It must be received just like Abraham received it, by faith.

Our standing with God is based on Christ alone, not ritual, not works, not heritage. We are justified by Christ alone.

Frankly, this first objection is a hang-up for many people in our day. A few months ago, a man sat in my study and said something like this to me, "Christianity? No. It won't work for me. It's only for those from the 'right' backgrounds." Let me ask you. Is that true? Will Christianity "work" only for certain people? Who can be right with God? Anybody who does what Abraham did.

Which brings us to a second question in the "fine print" of justification by faith.

II. Question #2: When does a person become right with God? (10-12)

To answer that question, the apostle prompts us to consider three issues in vv 10-12. In v 10, he invites us to consider...

A. Consider the possibilities (10).

V 10 "How was it then reckoned? When he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision?" In other words, when was Abraham made right with God, before or after he was circumcised?

William Barclay is right when he says (65), "To understand this passage we must understand the importance that the Jew attached to circumcision." To the Jew, a person could not be right with God without being circumcised. Circumcision was the badge, the proof that all was well between a person and God. Some rabbis were so adamant about it that they taught that if a Jew was so bad that he had to be condemned by God, there was an angel whose task it was to make him uncircumcised before he entered punishment (Barclay, 66-7).

So circumcision was a big deal in Judaism. Paul knew that. So he says, "Wait a minute. Abraham is our greatest patriarch. When was Abraham saved, before or after he was circumcised?"

The Life of Abraham (Genesis 12ff): We need to scan the chronological timeline in Abraham's life to find the answer. The Bible says that God called Abraham to leave the pagan land of Ur, and go to the land of promise. In Genesis 11, Abraham left Ur and headed north to Haran. In Gen 12, after his father died, he left Haran and set out for Canaan. He was 75 years old at the time, was married to Sarai, but had no son.

God made two great promises to him. In Gen 12:7, God said, "Abram, I'm going to give you this land." And in Gen 13:17, God said, "Abram, I'm going to give you an offspring for this land."

Gen 14 records the event of Lot's rescue. Then the climax comes in Gen 15. God appeared to Abraham in a vision in order to establish an eternal covenant with Abraham. In v 1, God made a promise, "Abraham, I give you Myself. I will be your reward." Abraham objected in v 2, "How, Lord? I don't understand how You will fulfill this promise. I don't even have a child." And God told Abraham, "Count the stars, Abraham! So shall your seed be (5)." Remember what happened? The text says (6), "And he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness."

Gen 16 records the blunder. When his faith wavered, Abraham went to Hagar, and the son, Ishmael, was born. Abraham was 86 years old.

In Gen 17, God established the covenant of circumcision. When Abraham was 99 years old (17:1), he and all the other males in his household were circumcised. The following year, at the age of 100, Abraham got his son, Isaac.

The million dollar question is this. WHEN was Abraham declared right with God, before or after he was circumcised? BEFORE, in fact, at least 14 years before. V 10 says, "Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision."

Why is that significant? For this reason. There are two common approaches to being right with God. Here they are.

1. *Through religious activity*
2. *Apart from religious activity*

How was Abraham made right with God? Through religious activity? Through circumcision? Through something he did? No. Apart from religious activity.

We are saved apart from religious activity. That truth grates against the natural man, as Martin Lloyd-Jones points out (183), "Man in sin is always anxious to claim a little credit for himself. He resents the doctrine that salvation is solely and entirely the free gift of God." We like the old adage, "God helps those who help themselves." We like to think we had something to contribute to justification. We did not.

Having considered the possibilities in v 10, let's...

B. Consider the pattern (11a).

Abraham gives us a pattern to follow in order to be right with God. V 11a "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised." When we consider Abraham as a pattern, we see the patriarch taking two steps.

1. *Abraham had faith.*

Notice that phrase, "the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised." Every once in awhile someone will say, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something." Is that true? Certainly not, but why not?

There's no question that Abraham was saved by faith. But what did he believe? Heb 11:13 says he "died in faith, not having received the promises but having seen them afar off, and was persuaded of them." Faith is linked to the Word of God. A person is justified when he believes the revelation of God. The content of faith has changed (called progressive revelation). We have more of God's revelation than Abraham did. And Abraham had more than Noah did. God told Noah, "Build a boat, and I'll save you." God told Abraham, "Leave Ur, and I'll bless you." God says to us, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."

The bottom line is this. When God speaks, we must respond. Abraham did. He believed God's promise. Then, in his pattern, Abraham took a second step.

2. Abraham received the sign of faith.

What was the sign of faith for Abraham? Circumcision. He was declared righteous in Gen 15. He was circumcised 14 years later in Genesis 17.

The LB offers this helpful paraphrase of vv 10-11, "When did God give this blessing to Abraham? It was before he became a Jew--before he went through the Jewish initiation ceremony of circumcision. It wasn't until later on, after God had promised to bless him because of his faith, that he was circumcised."

That's it. Circumcision didn't save Abraham or anybody else. What was circumcision then? It was two things. It was a "sign". That is, it was an outward token of something that had already happened. It was a "seal of righteousness." It was visible evidence that a person belonged to God, and was part of God's covenant community. Note: By the way, that's what believer's baptism is for us, the outward act of an inward decision.

C. Consider the principles (11b-12).

In vv 11b-12, two principles emerge. Grammatically, there are two purpose clauses which reveal two principles we can glean from Abraham's pattern.

1. Gentiles are saved the same way Abraham was.

V 11b "THAT he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised, that righteousness might be imputed unto them also." In v 11, who's Paul talking about when he says Abraham is the father of the "uncircumcised"? The Gentiles.

There's a children's song that goes, "Father Abraham had many sons. Many sons had father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you, so let's just praise the Lord." Is Abraham your father? He is your spiritual father IF you what? If you have been justified the same way Abraham was. Consider a second principle.

2. Jews must be saved the same way Abraham was.

Look at v 12, "And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only." Who are "the circumcision"? The Jews. How are Jews saved? V

12 continues, "But who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father, Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised."

Notice that jab again at the end of v 12. Abraham had faith BEFORE he was circumcised. He was saved before he was circumcised. And if that was the case, what about the Jews? Jews must be saved the same way Abraham was.

Mere externals save no one. It doesn't matter whether you are a Gentile or a Jew. The way to God is not through membership on a church roll. It's not through a religious ordinance. The way to God is not through any achievement I can accomplish. The way to God is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

It doesn't matter who we are. We need to be saved the same way Abraham was. What does that mean practically? Allow me to pose three implications.

Implications: What must I do?

1. I do not need to add to what God has done.

God's redemption is complete. If I have believed in Christ, I am justified. I am saved. I am reconciled to God. I am secure. I am an heir of God. Period! I do not need to add to what God has done.

2. I must accept what God has done.

Being born into a Christian home does not save us. Being baptized does not save us. Being religious does not save us. What does? The same thing that saved Abraham. We are saved when we take God at His Word, and accept what God has done for us.

We do not need to wonder about our standing with God. Sadly, there are not a few people in churches today who are emotional basket cases. They are tormented by feelings of insecurity. They need not be if they would learn to accept what God has done for them. Every day. The problem of poor self-esteem disappears when we take our eyes off of ourselves, and focus on what God has done for us in Christ.

Objection: "If my standing with God is based on Christ and not my works, then how I live doesn't matter, does it?" Wrong. Look at that phrase in v 12, "walk in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham." That highlights my third responsibility.

3. I must live in light of what God has done.

Allow me to speak pointedly. Our faith must not be so "personal" that it is not seen! Abraham's faith affected his steps. Does yours? Have you ever testified publicly to your faith by being baptized? Is your daily life giving evidence to your faith? I challenge you. Make a decision today to live in light of what God has done.

Elvina Hall summed it up with these words, "I hear the Savior say, 'Thy strength indeed is small! Child of weakness, watch and pray, find in Me thine all in all.' Lord, now indeed I find Thy power, and Thine alone, can change the leper's spots and melt the heart of stone. For nothing good have I whereby thy grace to claim--I'll wash my garments white in the blood of Calvary's Lamb. And when before the throne I stand in Him complete, 'Jesus died my soul to save,' my lips shall still repeat. Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe; Sin had left a crimson stain--He washed it white as snow." Does it sound too good to be true? Friends, it is true!