

“Just How Are We Righteous Before God?”

Genesis 15:1-6

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Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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When it comes to eternal life, the issue is being right with God. This is because eternal life has to do with God and having life in God. So just how do we become right with God? The Old Testament reading this morning answers this question. It says that “[Abraham] believed God, and [God] counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6 ESV).

Being right with God is addressed here because it talks about righteousness. So, the Scripture says that Abraham was righteous before God because God counted Abraham’s faith as righteousness.

It says there in the ESV that God “*counted* Abraham’s faith to him.” So, we need to know what this “counted” it means.

I wonder how we hear the word “counted.” It can sound like keeping track or keeping score. It can sound like adding and subtracting things to see where one comes out; to see whether one is in the black or in the red. Maybe counting goes like this. Imagine a piece of paper. Now draw a line down the middle of it to produce two columns. There is a good column and a bad column. We can put a mark under the good column when we do something good. We can put a mark under the bad column when we do something bad. Then we can run the totals. If the good things we have done outnumber the bad things, then we are righteous and right with God. If it goes the other way, then we aren’t. It seems that people naturally think this way.

This “counting,” however, should rather be understood as what one person thinks about someone else. Words that capture this would be regard, or esteem, or reckon; adjudged to be. So, Abraham believed God and God regarded, esteemed, adjudged Abraham to be righteous. We could also say imputed; imputed righteousness to Abraham just because he believed.

This tells us two important things. First, it tells us that God regarded Abraham as righteous because of his faith. Abraham could not have been regarded by God as righteous in God’s sight if Abraham had not believed. There must be faith. No one without faith is righteous in God’s way of reckoning.

Second, the regarding or reckoning is something that takes place in God. It is a revelation of God’s heart and mind. It is a revelation of God’s attitude and disposition toward us. When it says that God regarded, reckoned, imputed righteousness to Abraham, it means that it is God’s attitude and disposition toward us that renders us righteous before Him and saves us.

So, it is good news that God regarded Abraham as righteous because Abraham believed. It is good news because God’s regarding is in God and is by grace, by gift. To impute righteousness to Abraham, to regard him as righteous, just because Abraham believed, is a gift.

We can get wrapped up here once again in the measuring game. It must have been that Abraham had a strong faith so that God regarded it as righteousness. There must have been some great quality about Abraham’s faith that so impressed God that God regarded it as righteousness because of its quality. This counts me out, one may say, because I have a weak faith.

But this is not the way it is. The way out of this measuring game is to realize that God’s reckoning of Abraham’s faith as righteousness is something God does. It is the giving of a gift. It is conferring a status on Abraham that Abraham did not otherwise have in himself. So it is pure grace. The way out is also to be focused on the promise; to be focused on Christ and what He has

done. This is actually what faith does. Thus, one gets away from being obsessed with the quality of one's faith to looking to what faith is in.

But what did Abraham believe? The answer is that Abraham believed a promise. A promise can only be believed, that is, trusted. In other words, the person receiving a promise can only trust that the person making the promise will do what he or she says. And so trusting a promise is actually trusting in the other person's performance entirely.

And, in fact, the promise is intended to create this trust. So Abraham trusted God at the point of God's promise. God, therefore, regarded Abraham as righteous by grace because of this trust. And so Abraham had eternal life with God. So God made a promise that created faith in Abraham, which God then regarded as righteousness. This is all pure grace.

But this then leads to how the promise was delivered to him and what the promise was about. It also leads to what it then means to believe a promise. So we need to take account of the story.

The story starts with "the word of the LORD" (Gen. 15:1). God is taking action in Abraham's life. He takes this action by the word of the LORD. It says that the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, that is, to be seen. He then spoke with Abraham and interacted with him. He made promises.

Who is this "word of the LORD?" Yes, we must ask "who." We must ask "who" because this word of the LORD is a person. The word "word" is used which leads us to think of speech, or language. But we understand from the story that this word of the LORD is not language first, but a person. This is because this "word of the LORD" does things that persons do. He speaks. He speaks with empathy, encouragement, and purpose: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield, your reward shall be very great" (Gen. 15:1). We see that the word of the LORD speaks by saying "I." Language does not speak in the first person like that. The "I" reveals that there is a person speaking.

The word of the LORD also does things. He brought Abram outside. It must have been nighttime. He gave Abraham instructions: "Look at the stars, Abram." The word of the LORD was standing there with Abram, looking at the stars with him.

The word of the LORD is a person. But why word? What can we say about "word?" Word discloses. So the word of the LORD discloses God. Word can also become speech and then written down. So the word of the LORD speaks. He speaks truth. He speaks promises. He does things. What the word of the LORD spoke and did could be written down for us to know Him and hear Him speak and Hear His promises, even though we weren't there with Abraham that day. Indeed, that is what has happened, since we are talking about this. We are talking about this because it has been written.

Word of the LORD is also important because we humans believe as we are taught through speech. So the word of the LORD as person spoke words of promise to Abraham to generate faith. The LORD then regarded this faith as righteousness.

Who is this word of the LORD? The Apostle John by the Spirit tells us: In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God (John 1:1-2). This is God the Son, through whom God interacts with the human race; through whom God discloses Himself, His will; His plan; His promises; His disposition; His grace and salvation. The word of the LORD then became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. He became the man Jesus.

The word of the LORD spoke promise to Abraham. The promise for Abraham here was that he would have as many descendants, physical descendants, as the stars in the sky. This was utterly outlandish and astounding because Sarah, Abraham's wife, was not able to have children.

How could God promise such an outrageous and impossible thing?

Yet, Abraham believed the LORD, and his faith in the promise was regarded by the LORD as righteousness. His faith was in the impossible promise. His faith was just simply believing that what the LORD had said the LORD was going to do and was able to do. Thus, Abraham trusted that God was good and trusted in God's character and power; trusted in God as God and gave God the glory. This is how the Apostle Paul describes it (Rom. 4:16-22) All of this took place precisely where the promise was impossible on human terms, pursuant to human power, pursuant to human and natural possibilities; contrary to all human experience.

The center of the promise was also the person who made the promise, the word of the LORD; God the Son in human flesh appearing; Jesus Christ our Lord. And He speaks promises to us: your sins are forgiven. Believe in me and you shall have eternal life.

How could my sins be forgiven? How could I live though I die? How could God regard me as righteous when I am so full of darkness, and selfishness, and sinful pride? These things are impossible. Yet, I do recognize my need for God's gracious forgiveness and imputing me as righteous. My need is there because of this darkness, selfishness, and sinful pride. And I want to be right with God.

So Jesus makes the promise of forgiveness and life. These are quite impossible on human terms, but these are the promises that Christ gives. They can only be done by Him, and they have been done. And He leads you to say yes and amen to these promises; that is to believe that they are true and that He is able to deliver. He is able to deliver because He has done it. He has died and He has risen from the dead. He died to atone for our trespasses; He rose for our justification. In this yes and amen and thanks be to God, God regards you as righteous and receives you unto Himself. This truly is amazing grace and your hope and your joy. Amen.