

Second Sunday in Lent – Epistle

Receiving Christ's Due

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

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Analysis by Betty Krafft

Romans 4:1 What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." 4 Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. 5 But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. 13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. 16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17 as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

DIAGNOSIS: Receiving Our Due

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Expecting What's Due*

Paul writes to two ethnic groups in the Roman church: Gentiles and Jews. Both groups have reason to boast (v. 2). Rome was a great empire that dominated the known world. But God had given the Torah to the Jews. The Jews were God's chosen people, with Abraham as their ancestor (v. 13; see v. 16 for a broader viewpoint). And, apart from Paul, most good Jews believed that God considered Abraham righteous because he earned God's approval. Both Jew and Gentile alike sought God's blessing based on the law. So who deserved God's attention? And why?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Working for Wages*

One problem with seeking to obey the law, Paul points out, is that this effort substitutes for faith (v. 14). Seeking to keep the law is like working for wages. You get what you earn, what you deserve. And, if Abraham was justified by works, then he has something to boast about (v. 2). There is no longer any need to trust in God, or even to call on God. Just follow the rules and everything will turn out right.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Manufacturing the Wrong Goods*

But that doesn't tell the truth about Abraham. For Joshua reminds the Israelites, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods" (Joshua 24:2). When it comes to serving other gods we too live like Abraham. Our hearts manufacture idols, things that call us away from the worship of the One True God, all day long. We continue

to believe that other things will save us and the world around us: the stock market, consumer spending, political and military might, our own good deeds. Yet the law commands us “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). We forget that the things that make us righteous before the world, give us nothing to boast about before God (v. 2). Thus, the law brings wrath (v. 15), not reward.

PROGNOSIS: Receiving Christ's Due

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Receiving the Right Goods*

But “while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (5:8). While we were off in an alien land worshiping other gods, Christ took this very sin upon himself and took it with him to the grave along with all our other sins. In the resurrection, Christ gives us new life in him. For Jesus “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (4:25). We cannot even boast about our faith, for that, too, is a gift. In his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, Luther writes, “I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, . . .” In mercy for the sake of Christ, God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (v. 17).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Reckoned as Righteous*

We now share in the promise given to Abraham, we are reckoned as righteous (not because we deserve it, v. 3). For us that means that sin no longer rules over us because God considers us righteous and God's opinion is the only one that matters. Being declared righteous we are free from the law. We share the

blessings to Abraham who was made the father, not only of the Jews, but also of the Gentiles (v. 16). And what is the promise to Abraham, the “father of many nations” (v. 17)? That he would inherit the world (v. 13), in order to “bless all the nations” (Genesis 12:3).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)

Through Christ, God blesses us to be a blessing to the world. “Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin” (4:7-8). We “owe no one anything, except to love one another . . .” (13:8). Accepted by God through Christ we are given the power to accept others because of Christ. In Christ all divisions and all boasting ceases. No matter what our ethnic identity, we share the faith of Abraham; Abraham is our spiritual father. So we are free to serve all people in joy and humility.