

# Second Sunday of Lent, Epistle, Year A

LIVING GRATIS

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Second Sunday of Lent

Analysis by Peter Keyel

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: Demanding Our Due

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Earned

The people addressed in Romans were good Christians. Their “faith is proclaimed throughout the world” (1:8) according to Paul, who longed to visit them. In addition to being good Christians, they “know the law” (7:1) and concern themselves a lot with keeping the law so that they can be good Christians. In a way, they want to earn being good Christians.

Even today, we know what good Christian behavior is and who the good Christians are. We see those who are rightly called Christians along with all those other hypocrites who just don’t get it and promote views we consider anti-Christian. We also strive to be the kind of people who are called good Christians by others.

#### Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Owed

The problem is that good Christians end up boasting about the fact, which Paul points out. We end up feeling that are owed something for being good Christians, even if we don’t like to admit that to ourselves. After all, we know better than to boast... that’s part of why we’re the good Christians. So we don’t openly boast, and we dress up the language a little more circumspectly, but we’re still proud to be the ones who get it right. We feel there is a quantifiable difference between the good Christians and the bad ones. We try hard to be the good ones. Shouldn’t we get something for that? What’s wrong with that, especially when we claim we are not doing it “for a reward”? We may know the right theology (as opposed to all that wrong theology out there), talk about Law/Gospel distinction and about getting everything right. However, even our talk of good and evil, or right and wrong, puts us in the position of wanting to boast about our works, even if only to ourselves and God.

#### Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Wrath

The problem is that we end up bragging to God about our works and feeling like we are owed our due. We’ve also placed

ourselves in the position of judging others. At this point, “the law brings wrath” (v. 15) as Paul says, and that doesn’t end so well for us.

Just look to all of the schisms in the Christian church, let alone society or politics. All of our attempts to rightly order our society, or our relationship with God, end in division and wrath.

#### PROGNOSIS: Given a Gift

##### Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Grace

Fortunately for us, God has chosen to correctly order our relationship with God. God came into the world as Jesus Christ and died to justify the ungodly. And this is God’s power: that God “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (v. 17). We, who are owed nothing, have our debt paid with God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

##### Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Guaranteed

One of those things called into existence through Christ’s action is faith. This justifying faith is a gift given by God, regardless of our ability to get our theology straight, regardless of whether we are “good” Christians or “bad” Christians. This faith does not rest on our works, but instead on the grace that was guaranteed on the cross. Paul points out that this is the critical switch—that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. In grace, there is no more law, and hence no more violation. It’s no longer about right and wrong, good theology or bad. It’s about a gift that is guaranteed by God.

##### Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Gifted

This new faith is a gift that we are given to share with others. It is no longer about being a good Christian, but about living in our trust that Christ is good. We are free to thank God as we

are moved by this justifying faith. Our witness is not about whether our actions are correct or incorrect, but about sharing trust in the one who “justifies the ungodly” and, out of that faith, doing good.