

Counted As Righteous Galatians 3:1-9

When I was in seminary, I was part of a controversy. More than one, actually. But in this one the seminary President ordered one of his vice-presidents to hire me for a summer job. My first day of work, when I sat down in his office, he got up, walked around me, and closed the door. He sat back down at his desk and just looked at me for a minute and finally said, "Let's get one thing straight. I didn't want to hire you. There were several other people that were higher on my list. You're here only because I am being ordered to have you. So you better spend the rest of the summer trying to impress me because right now I am not. And if I can find a reason to fire you, I will."

It was quite the pep talk.

And I spent entire summer trying to prove myself—working as hard and creatively as I could because my boss told me I had to prove myself every day.

How many of us feel that way about God? We were saved by grace. Jesus has made sure we are forgiven. But once we have been saved by grace, save by God's great love alone, then we need to earn His love. We need to work hard to prove ourselves to God and earn His continued love and favor and approval.

Do you fear letting God down?

Do you fear losing Jesus' love?

Do you worry that God look at you with disappointment?

Do you worry about losing your salvation?

I remember once having a conversation with a college friend. He was a Christian and he's a really good and kind person but he lived in fear of committing a sin and not having time to ask for forgiveness before he died. He even sketched out a scenario, "What if I get in a car wreck on my way to the priest for confession? I don't want to spend eternity in hell!"

This was the very issue that plagued the church in Galatia. The Holy Spirit led a man named Paul to ask them this question:

Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

Galatians 3:2-3

We said last week that the Church in Galatia, to whom Paul was writing this letter, was infiltrated by people teaching that in order to follow Jesus, they had to become Jewish, follow the 613 commands of Jewish legal codes and do things like not eat shrimp or a rare steak or raisins or meat and cheese at the same time or if they were men wear a beard or a woman keep their hair covered. And if they didn't follow all 613 commands of Jewish law, then God was disappointed and their salvation was at risk.

The Galatians were told they had to spend every day trying to prove themselves to God.

As we talk about our identity, the fundamental ideas that form who we are, the question we seek to answer this week is "What am I?"

The Holy Spirit led Paul to use a very specific word to describe what we are.

Righteous. Jesus says if we faith we are righteous.

Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?

Galatians 3:5-6

A lot depends upon us understanding two key elements in this passage. We'll talk about righteousness first.

What does righteous mean?

Righteousness is simply having a right relationship with God.

Righteousness is a huge concept across the entirety of the Bible. If you look in the commentaries on Scripture or theological dictionaries, you will see a host of definitions—just, honest, loyal, entitled, correct practice, upright, innocent, in the right.

And all those things are right—sort of. All those adverbs are descriptions of what it means to be righteous. They are the fruit of righteousness. They are the fruit, the by-product of having a right relationship with God.

The Biblical concept of righteousness refers to a legal status, a moral state—meaning that being made righteous moves us from a status of unrighteous, meaning not right with God, to righteous, being right with God. You can think of it this way.

If I steal \$20 from you. And you know I stole \$20 from you, then our relationship is not right. Our innate sense of justice requires that things are set right in one way or another. One of two things happen. Either I pay you the money I owe you and apologize and repent, promising never to steal from you again. Or if I cannot pay, you forgive me and make up the \$20 in some other way.

Until one of those two things happen, we are not right.

Now, someone may say, "Aren't we right with God already?"

No. We are not. Our natural state, because we are born sinners and we continue to sin, puts us at odds with God. One of the best statements of this came from the Old Testament prophet Hosea:

The LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

Hosea 4:1-2

Romans 3:10 puts it really simply:

No one is righteous. No, not one.

If we understand that God has a controversy with us and we understand that I am not righteous, what do we do? Our instinct is we must do something. We must make it up for it, pay God back somehow and prove ourselves in some way.

Well, we may be able to pay back \$20 or \$20,000 thousand dollars or even \$2 million if we spent our entire life trying to do it. But we cannot pay God back, we cannot make things right with our sin debt. We cannot undo what we have done. We cannot set repair what has been broken. We cannot restore what has been lost. We cannot bring to life what is dead.

Or to put it another way, how can someone unrighteous make themselves righteous?

We cannot.

On our vacation we went to Williamsburg, Virginia this summer and we went to the living history museum built to resemble Jamestown. My daughter Penelope and I wandered into the recreation of the governor's house and there was a man there who played the role of the Jamestown doctor. He had a big table full of medical instruments from the 1600's in front of him and he carefully explained the use of each one.

There was a huge rusted metal syringe, a scalpel, and a bone saw. There was a tool designed for bloodletting. There was an arrow remover and a bullet extractor. He explained painstakingly how each one was used while six-year-old Penelope listened with rapt attention, nodding her head, asking questions. And I simply tried to keep from passing out. At the end he said, “But unfortunately, even with all their care and having the best surgical tools of the day, their patients were more than likely to die, even from minor injuries, than they were to live.”

At that point, I was satisfied with the amount of information already conveyed and prepared to head for the door and some fresh air. But he continued.

“They didn’t know about germs. They never washed their tools. The very instruments they thought would save their life, instead filled their wounds with deadly germs.”

Impure things cannot make us clean us or heal us or make us pure. We would be crazy to argue differently.

And the unrighteous cannot make themselves righteous.

But the righteousness of Jesus can make us righteous, Galatians promises us, if we have faith.

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Galatians 3:7,9

What does faith mean?

To understand the amazing promise laid before us today that we are made righteous and right with God through faith, we must know the story of a man named Abraham.

Let me give a brief commercial for the unity of God’s Word.

One of the great parts about the New Testament and we see it especially the letters that the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write is the New Testament draws heavily upon the Old Testament. Sometimes we think that the New Testament is the story of the nice God and the Old Testament is the story of the mean God and we just need to pay attention to the nice God. Or sometimes people think that the New Testament has overturned and negated the Old Testament.

No, the New Testament is built upon the foundation of the Old Testament the foundation stones of the Old Testament set the story and the message and direction and the promise of the New Testament. Without the Old Testament, the New

Testament has no grounding. Without the New Testament, the Old Testament is incomplete. If you know the Word of God well enough to make the connections, you will see Jesus on every page of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is Jesus concealed. The New Testament is Jesus revealed.

The foundation of Galatians' promise that we are made righteous through the Gospel is grounded in two Old Testament stories involving a man named Abraham.

Who was Abraham?

Abraham was called by God the be father of his people, first the father, the patriarch of the Jewish people. But his name given to him by the Lord means "The Father of many nations." So Abraham is an important person for Christians because He lived by faith. In the book of Romans Paul even said, 'we walk in the footsteps of faith that our father Abraham had.'

Around 4,000 years ago, around 2000 BC, Abraham lived in a city called Haran— not far from where Galatia used to be in modern day Turkey. God called Abraham to pack up and leave his homeland and move to an unknown land, a land that God promised He would show him. He ended up moving to the southern part of Israel— about 500 miles south.

The Bible defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen." In other words, **faith is trusting God to do what He promises He will do before He does it.** Faith is acting upon a trust in God's Word.

God made Abraham a promise. And Abraham believed Him and acted upon His word alone.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Genesis 12:1-3

Faith is not merely mental assent or intellectual agreement. Faith is not just agreement in words. Faith is not nodding our head while our hands and feet go in a different direction.

Faith is having sufficient trust in the Word of God, God's character, God's intent to live according to those promises. Faith is simply submission to God trusting that His will for me is grounded in the kind of love that would lead God to die on the cross in my stead.

I want to drill down on a particular word that we see in Genesis 12:1-3, a word that that is deeply connected to righteousness and faith.

It is the word great. God promised He would make Abraham great—not only him but his descendants.

In God’s economy, if faith is the way to righteousness, righteousness is the key to greatness.

And this might fall hard on our ears because greatness is something we are not supposed to seek. We think that for one reason—because we don’t understand what greatness really is. When the Bible talks about greatness, it is talking about something very specific.

You see everything the Bible promises, like joy or peace or love or goodness or even greatness is something that our heart innately desires. But our hearts because they are misshapen by sin, frequently pursue a counterfeit version.

My grandparents, while they were alive, made their home in northern California, in the area of the 1849 gold rush. One of the things we would do on my summer visits is pan for gold in a little river close to their home. And the gold panning always went like this: I would think I found something that was gold I would get excited and jump up and down and think I was rich. I would show the rock to my Grandpa, who would tell me, “Nope. That’s Fools Gold.” Keep trying. And I would. But if I didn’t have him, I would have brought home a bunch of counterfeit gold, thinking I had the real thing. I had to listen to him.

Counterfeit joy, peace, love, goodness and even greatness is hard to distinguish unless we listen to Jesus. And so Biblical greatness, which our hearts long for, is worked out through righteousness.

Without faith, there is no righteousness. Without faith we cannot be right with God. And greatness, true greatness, the kind for which we are made and the kind that our hearts long for, is impossible.

Faith...righteousness...greatness.

What does that greatness look like?

Righteousness fosters faith

Years later, God made Abraham a promise. The Lord expanded upon His original promise to Abraham and showed Him the greatness of the people following Him, the descendants of his family line.

Abraham was childless at the time and approaching 100 years old as was his wife Sarah. You would have to say that at this time and stage of life, their chances of having a child biologically were not very good. But God said, a great nation will come from you.

And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 15:3-6

Righteousness results in great servanthood.

When we read Genesis’ account of creation, we cannot help but notice the great plans that God had for Adam and Eve and the great role that God gave them right away.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

So not only did God give Adam and Eve an incredible amount of responsibility—dominion over everything all over the earth, putting the life of every creature that walks on the earth or swims in the sea or flies in the skies and every plant that grows in the ground—God also told them to create other human beings and fill the earth. God invited Adam and Eve to share the very role He himself had played—to exercise dominion over creation and to create other human beings.

If anyone says that not only the increase of faith but also its beginning and the very desire for faith, by which we believe in Him who justifies the ungodly and comes to the regeneration of holy baptism—if anyone says that this belongs to us by nature and not by a

gift of grace, that is, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit amending our will and turning it from unbelief to faith and from godlessness to godliness, it is proof that he is opposed to the teaching of the Apostles,