

Why Does Faith Matter?

Week 4 of Series Romans 3-8

Romans 4:13-25

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Preliminaries

Greeting

Pastoral Highlight: Life Together Sunday is next week.

Baptism

We set aside these days to celebrate the life of our church. God's work in this body. And one of the things we want to get better at offering regularly on these Sundays is the opportunity for baptism. If you are a follower of Jesus and you have not been baptized, the elders would love to talk with you about being baptized next week.

Baby Celebrations

Another aspect of the life of our church is the rejoicing together when God gives the gift of new children. If you are a member of Union Church and your family has been blessed with a new child and you'd like to celebrate this new life and pray over this new life with the church, then please reach out to me.

I. Introduction

We're continuing with our study of the book of Romans, and I'd love for you to have your bibles open to Romans 4 as we move through verse 13-25. And today as we work through the text, I want to answer one short, but massively important question: **Why does faith matter?**

Imagine that some of us go to see a movie together. And after the film is over and we're walking out of the theater, everybody starts to talk about how great the movie was. We come to the parking lot and stand in a circle, still basking in the glow of our experience, and everybody just gushes over the film. It was amazing! The performance, the cinematography, the story. Except it becomes clear after a little while that I totally misunderstood the plot of the movie. I've got the main character wrong, I misunderstood the big problem in the story, I thought *this* person was the villain, but it was really this *other* character. So when the time is right, you gently point out that I misunderstood the movie. But what if my response was, "No, you don't understand. I *loved* that movie!" and then I refused to listen to your correction? Well, if I continued in my wrong thinking, then I would have a lot of warm feelings about the film, but all the warm feelings in the world would never help me truly experience the depth of joy that it had to offer, right?

The reason I want to answer the question, *Why does faith matter?* today is so that we would not be Christians who gush with warm feelings about faith, but totally miss the plot of faith. The danger is that we would go about our lives as followers of Jesus and not understand why faith matters. And it's dangerous because if you have lots of warm feelings about faith, but a vague understanding of faith you will have less joy in the wonder of what God has done for you. Or you will live timidly as a Christian out of fear that you'll be called upon to explain something you know you can't. Or you will "fake it till you make it" and preach wrongly to your own heart and to others. Or - most dangerous of all - if you don't understand why faith matters, you might go through life with false security believing that you have it, but be grievously and eternally wrong. And my burden as your pastor is that you would not have a false sense of security, or vague warm feelings, but deep joy as we grasp the plot of Christian faith together.

If you want to grasp the importance of a thing, it's not always helpful to focus merely on the thing itself. Instead you have to see the thing in a larger context. If I asked, why does the sun matter, and I only looked at the sun, then all I would be able to say is that the sun must matter because it's a huge ball of gas burning brightly in the sky. That doesn't help me so much. I have to ask questions that help me see the bigger picture of how the solar system of planets are held in orbit by the sun's gravity, how the warmth and light of the sun fuels life on earth. The sun matters because of how this bright ball of gas is connected to the planets and to photosynthesis and to sunsets over the ocean! That's what Romans 4:13-25 is going to do for us today. There is no definition of faith in what Paul has to say here, but he takes us on a tour of the solar system of the gospel and helps us see how these facets of the gospel are held together by faith.

So here's where we're headed. Four points from the passage today: (1) The promise comes by... faith. (2) Righteousness comes by faith. (3) Faith is believing God. (4) Faith is for you.

Before we look at the Book together, let's pray once more. *Father, help us by your Spirit to come and see what you have done; how you are awesome in your deeds toward us. Open up my mouth to preach the gospel. Open up our eyes to see the glory of the gospel. And open up our hearts to receive and believe the gospel. Lord Jesus, you must increase and we must decrease. Would you make it so, for our good and your glory? Amen.*

II. The Promise Comes by... Faith

Since the back half of Romans 3, Paul has been making the case that people can only be right with God through faith, not by the good works we do. And starting in the beginning of chapter 4 he calls two trustworthy witnesses to help him make his point. He says, what about Abraham (the founding Father of the Jewish people)? And he quotes a pivotal moment in the story of Abraham, in Genesis 15:6 where it says "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness."¹ And then he points to King David - the greatest king in Israel's history - who also says God blesses his people apart from their works. Paul has been making the point that God has been saving his people by the same means since the beginning and that means is by faith, not by works. And here in verse 13,

¹ Rom 4:3

we're starting off in the middle of Paul's argument. He's not done pointing back to Abraham to make his case:

¹³ For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

So we're asking why faith matters, and here in verse 13 Paul is showing how faith relates to the promise. So let's break down this sentence.

Into this whole discussion about salvation, Paul brings the promise. What is "the promise"? We talk about the promises of God all the time in church, but how easy is it to adopt the lingo without grasping the meaning! Now Paul gets us started in understanding the promise. We know, generally, what a promise is. And Paul says the promise is given to Abraham and his offspring. And the promise is "that he would be heir of the world."

Now here's what's interesting: there is no time ever in the bible that God actually says to Abraham, "I'm gonna make you heir of the world." So is Paul lying? No! Paul is able to write that because it's a summary of the whole breadth of God's promise that he's been making to his people ever since we first sinned against him!

Since the fall God has been promising to redeem what our sin has broken. And as he promises to Adam and Eve, and to Noah, and to Abraham, and to Moses and the people of Israel, and to King David, and to the prophets - through all these promises, God's plan of redemption is revealed more and more. It becomes clearer and clearer that there is one coming who will defeat the serpent, and preserve God's people, and bless all the families of the earth, and write the Law of God on the hearts of his people, and rule over all creation forever. That's the promise that Paul is giving in shorthand here.

In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul writes about the promises of God and says, "¹⁶ Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ." So what Paul is teaching us is that God promised Abraham that he would be heir of the world because the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and all the others throughout the history of God's people finds its yes and amen in Jesus Christ. Christ is the great realizer of all God's promises. And Christ will reign over his kingdom forever and ever!

So when we talk about the promises of God as believers, we're talking about our greatest, most ultimate hope as followers of Jesus: God's promise to save and redeem and repair and rule over all of creation through Jesus Christ! And Paul is saying that *that* promise God gave to Abraham and to us doesn't not come through the law. It comes through the righteousness of faith.

We'll talk more about righteousness in the next section, but right now the connection we need to make is how the promise of God is connected to faith. The promise of God for Christ to save and set all things right in all of creation comes to God's people not through the law, but through faith.

Next let's talk about the righteousness that comes through faith.

III. Righteousness Comes by Faith

So we're still in verse 13 here. And if you've been in Romans with us for the past few weeks, or if you read the first three chapters of Romans, you'd know that the line "through the righteousness of faith" is a callback to information Paul's already covered. All the way back in chapter 1:17 Paul has preached to the church, "the righteous shall live by faith." And he's made the case that we need salvation because all of us - Jew and gentile - are unrighteous before God and deserve his wrath for our sin. In chapter 3 he says again, no one is righteous! But now in Jesus Christ God's righteousness has been revealed. And now he says, "...the promise ...did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith."

In 2 Corinthians 5:21, it says "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This is the Great exchange of Christianity! Christ took our sin to the cross and we have received righteousness. He received our rejection, wrath aimed at sinners and he has covered us in his obedience, covered in his holy life, covered in his acceptance before the Father. Righteousness is a right standing with God that opens up the way to receive the promise of God.

Paul is so eager to make it clear that a right relationship with God cannot come from obedience to the law! Look what he says in verses 14 & 15:

¹⁴ For 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 there is no transgression.

If you live by the law, you can't receive what is promised because you're trusting in your wages rather than in the gift of God. And your wages can never buy you the righteousness you need! The only thing the law can do is show us where we fall short of God's righteousness.

That's what Paul is saying there in verse 15. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. He's not saying if we don't have the law, we can't sin. He's saying the law was not ever meant to be a means for us to be right with God. That's not what it was built for! The law was given to us to be a lens that we put on so that we can finally see what's wrong. It exposes our sin. It shows us where we stand in relation to God. It clarifies for us how we sin against him!

So the law doesn't make us righteous; it cannot! It was never meant to. Looking back up at verse 13, another way to translate "the righteousness of faith" would be to say, "the righteousness that comes through faith." So the promise becomes available to us through righteousness and righteousness - being right with God - comes through faith.

And all of this, Paul goes on to say, is a gift. Look at the first part of verse 16: “That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring...”

In other words, if access to God’s promise depended on you and your obedience to the law there is no way it could be guaranteed. You would have no confidence in the promise of God because it would depend on you and your weakness and sinfulness. But It doesn’t depend on you. The promise rests on God’s undeserved gift. That’s what grace is! And because it rests on God’s graciousness, we can trust that the promise is guaranteed.

So at this point let’s pause for just a moment and take stock of the tour of the gospel that Paul has given us so far in this passage. As I was studying this week, I kept trying to visualize how all of these elements of the gospel relate to each other. Here’s what I kept picturing.

[explain slide 1,2,3,4,5]

Here is why I think this picture might be helpful. First of all, we talk about the gospel all the time. And as we study the Bible, we will also hear about things like the law, and the promise, and faith. And all of these things are facets of the gospel story. And it’s good to have an idea of how all of these facets of the gospel work together. Like I said toward the beginning of the message, sometimes in order to grasp the importance of a thing, we need to see how it relates to other things that matter. So here we see all this gospel vocabulary and all of it, together comprises a more comprehensive picture of what’s happening theologically, when we talk about the gospel!

IV. Faith is Believing God

Now Paul has taken us on a tour of the gospel, but remember I said my aim was to answer the question why does faith matter? And amid all of this gospel vocabulary, I think that’s Paul’s goal too. Because for the rest of chapter 4, he goes back to the testimony of Abraham and points to his example of faith. And he shows us, what he’s already told us. Remember in 4:3 he said Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. And now he’s going to show us with Abraham's life that faith is believing God.

Now, we’re gonna power through verse 16-22. I’m going to read it and stop here and there to comment, but the overarching picture here in this section is that Paul has shifted from talking about all the things that orbit around faith to show us an example of faith in action. He’s showing us through Abraham’s story that faith is taking God at his word that he is able to bring about his promises. So let’s start reading again in verse 16...

¹⁶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

So everyone who has faith is a child of Abraham, a member of the family of God. It’s not dependent on whether you’re Jewish or whether you’re obedient to the outward signs and seals of the law. It is a matter of your heart before God.

And now Paul is going to show us Abraham's faith.

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. ¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

God had promised Abraham that the world would be blessed through his family, but he had no children. And God promised Abraham that he would have a child. So what does it mean to have faith? It means to trust that what is really real is greater than how we feel or how things appear. Abraham was old. His wife was barren and beyond the age of childbearing. But God had promised them a child. In another part of the New Testament Paul writes, "we walk by faith and not by sight."² Faith isn't blind. But sometimes faith is opposed to your perceptions and your feelings about your circumstances. It's not naive optimism. It doesn't require you to suspend your reason. It requires you to reach for a more foundational truth - that God is working outside what you can see. It's a death to trusting yourself and a choice to rest your hope on something outside your limited scope.

Let's keep reading.

²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness."

Once again, this tells us faith is not an absence of thinking. It's not sticking your head in the sand. It is meditating on the power of God to make good on his word. There is logic to faith! The logic begins with, "If there is a Creator God (and there is), then he must have more power than I could ever comprehend. And he must know that I'm as good as dead and Sarah is barren, but he's a God who makes something out of nothing and brings dead things to life. So my age and my wife's barrenness will be no obstacle at all for him!"³

Faith is letting your mind and your heart dwell on what's true about God. Remembering how we've seen him work - both in the scriptures and in our lives. Calling our hearts to never forget his mighty deeds for his people across the centuries. You and I are even more privileged than Abraham, because we have this book! We have the Old Testament and all its testimony to the ways God acted to deliver and protect his wayward people. We have the four gospels and all of Christ's life and ministry! We have the cross and the resurrection and the ascension! We have the book of Acts and all the ways the Spirit animated and preserved and propelled the church! We have the letters to the churches! We have an embarrassment of riches compared to Abraham! Faith is preaching that

² 2 Cor 5:7

³ Adapted from Keller Commentary

history to your heart - that those things are the window into real reality - not the disenchanting, limited scope of my vision right now. Preaching that history to your heart and trusting that God is not a liar when he makes promises.

Now, Pastor Kyle said this last week when he was preaching about Abraham's faith. Paul gives us Abraham's life of faith as an example to follow and he says that Abraham did not waver. But if you read Genesis, it's not hard to see that he did indeed waver in faith. He questioned God, he lied and betrayed his wife, he tried to bring about God's promises according to his own strength. He was deeply flawed and sinful. But Paul isn't evaluating Abraham's faith according to his record of obedience. Remember, the strength of our faith is not dependent on our obedience. Paul evaluates Abraham's faith according to God's grace and faithfulness. And God kept Abraham. And every mistake, every wavering, every misstep is just a reminder to trust in God and his promise instead of Abraham's feeble strength.

Now there's just one more important thing to say before we end. Look at verse 23-25.

²³ But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

V. Faith is For You

Friends, the last thing to say is that faith is for you. Everything that was true about Abraham can be true of you and I. What does it mean for you and I to have faith that brings us to the promise of God? It means to believe that God has done what is required to bring about his promises in Jesus Christ. To trust that his cross was sufficient to pay for your sin and his resurrection is the foretaste of your own resurrection. And even though you will waver, you will fail, your track record of faith will be nothing to be proud of, the invitation is not to trust in your ability to be faithful, but on God's unending, steadfast, unassailable ability to keep his promise of salvation to you.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ who was delivered up for your sin and raised so that you might be right with God? Then it will be counted to you as righteousness!

This is why faith matters. Because Faith is the confidence that God will make good on his promises and it is the conviction that he is making good on his promises even though we can't see it. And it is only this faith, which is itself a gift from God, that makes us right with God.

So don't lose heart! This is reason for rejoicing! You have a God who will keep you even through troubles and trials and who will lead you into glory with him. You have an unquenchable hope!

If you're not a Christian, I'm sure that there are more winsome apologetic arguments that could have been laid out for your consideration today. Perhaps more of your objections to Christianity could have been addressed. I'd love to talk about those things with you. But one thing to consider is that at the end of the day, even if every apologetic argument were made and every objection addressed, underneath everything else Christianity is calling you to consider Jesus Christ, who was hung on a

tree for sin and raised to life for our justification. If the rest of Christianity is attractive to you, but you can't put your trust in the crucified and risen Jesus, then you can't call yourself a Christian. But the opposite is also true. If you are still full of doubts and objections, but you are drawn to put your trust in the crucified and risen Jesus, then I would invite you to trust in him for your righteousness before God and trust in him to be powerful enough to keep walking with you through your doubts.

Faith is believing that there is a deeper reality behind what we can see, who is working for the redemption of those who trust in his promise. Would you put your faith in him?