

SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT

There is something about our world that just ain't right. You know that. There are people who are simply wicked. In 2019 over 400,000 times one person looked at another person and decided they had a right to kill them. That ain't right. The rate of greed is up, and the rate of gossip, and arrogance, and that ain't right. The result: **"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people."** (Romans 1:18) That's what's in Romans chapter one.

There's something about you that just ain't right. The moment you and I judge the wicked people out there, we condemn ourselves, because in our heart we do the same wicked things. We are selfish, and greedy, and hateful, and that ain't right. The result: **"Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed."** (Romans 2:5) That's what's in Romans chapter two.

There's something about everyone that just ain't right. No matter who you are or how good your intentions, all of us fall short of being what we know we should be, and that ain't right. The Bible's term for something that's not right, is not righteous. **"There is no one righteous, not even one."** (Romans 3:10) That's what's in Romans chapter three.

Yet apparently, God still thinks some people are alright. Every single book of the Bible talks about how God loves people, how he shows that love, how he takes people to heaven because he wants to live with us forever. If there are people in heaven, and God thinks they're alright, then here's the most important question you'll ever answer: how do you get from "that's just not right" to "God thinks you're alright"? How do you get righteous?

Well, there's two leading theories about that, and together they form our theme tonight, **Working or Believing.**

HOW DO WE GET RIGHT?

The first theory is the most popular and it is captured well by a quote commonly attributed to Buddha. **"Set your heart on doing good. Do it over and over again, and you will be filled with joy."** It's the most popular theory for getting right because literally everyone in the world thinks this way at least some of the time. We all think that getting better starts with me. I do good and then I'll be alright, through working.

But St. Paul, who wrote the letter to the Romans, could not disagree more. **"no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. ²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify."** (Romans 3:20-21) See what he said? Nobody, ever, can get right by working. Instead there's a new way to be righteous, and it comes

from God. **“²²This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”** Jesus Christ was perfectly righteous—there was nothing wrong with him. And yet God took out his wrath on Jesus so that you and I would never experience that. It’s a way for us to get righteous, by believing.

Are you working or believing? If you’ve been Lutheran for a long time, then chances are you’re familiar with the concept of being righteous by faith. That’s a main teaching point of Lutheran churches because it’s a main teaching of the Bible. But here’s the problem: No matter how long you’ve been Lutheran, you’ve known about being righteous by works for even longer. You’re born with that. All of us are. Thinking that we get right by doing what’s right, that’s hardwired into humanity.

But has that mindset ever come back to bite you? If you think that you get right by doing what’s right, then what about when you do something wrong? Have you ever caught yourself being dishonest about your wrongs, minimizing them, ignoring them, pretending that they never happened? That’s not healthy. Have you ever started defending yourself for something you did even though you knew it was wrong? Someone critiques your performance and the first thoughts through your head are all the reasons they are wrong and you are justified. That’s not good! Have you ever considered the consequences if all your good work isn’t good enough? Because God has. **“Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.”** (Romans 2:10) The wrath of an almighty God stored up for you, that is not good!

Which is why God has a definitive answer for us today about how we get righteous. It’s an answer that goes back before you ever heard of Lutheranism, before you were born, before Paul wrote a letter to the Romans, before Jesus died on the cross, before Moses got God’s ten commandments. It goes all the way back to Abraham. The Bible says Abraham is in heaven, so if we can figure out how he got there, how he got right with god, then we can do it too. Was Abraham working or believing?

ABRAHAM WAS RIGHTEOUS BY FAITH

So let’s learn about Abraham. **“¹What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? ²If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.”** (Romans 4:1-2) Actually a popular teaching about Abraham when this was written was that he was called righteous because he did so much faithful work for God. Those teachers took all the good stories about Abraham, like when God called him to go to a new land and he did it! But those teachers conveniently ignored all the times Abraham was less than perfect, like when he lied and said his wife was his sister and put her in danger of committing adultery, TWICE. Or when he had an affair. Or when he failed to trust God’s promise. But Paul doesn’t care what the most popular teaching is. He asks a good Lutheran

question, **“What does the Scripture say? Here’s a quote from Genesis 15, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”** (Romans 4:3)

If Abraham got righteous by working, then God would have owed him. But look carefully. In the Bible story, where did Abraham’s righteousness come from? Believing. Abraham believed in a God who justifies ungodly people. You know what that means? We don’t have to conveniently forget about the skeletons in Abraham’s closet. There was lots of stuff that just wasn’t right about him. And we don’t have to ignore that stuff in your life either because your righteousness doesn’t depend on your work. In fact, even if you are ungodly, you’re in luck. God justifies the ungodly. Just ask Abraham. Ungodly as he was, he’s in heaven because God declared him righteous, and he believed it.

According to humans, we get righteous by working. But according to God, we get righteous by faith. He declares it. We believe it. That’s how it’s always been.

GOD’S PROMISES COME BY FAITH

And that’s how God’s promise to Abraham worked too. Perhaps you remember God’s great promise to Abraham that he spoke when he called him to a new land. Remember God said, **“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”**

God makes this enormous promise, but why? Well there were two main theories. Some people thought Abraham worked so hard at keeping God’s law, that’s why God made him a special promise. But Paul says, that’s just not true. That’s not how promises work. He said, **“¹³ It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.”** (Romans 4:13)

A promise isn’t a *quid pro quo*, you give me this and I’ll give you that. It’s just a promise. Paul compares it to an inheritance. He says, **“¹⁴ For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless,”** (Romans 4:14) An heir doesn’t need to do any work to earn what’s promised him in the inheritance. The promise of the one making the will is what counts. Can you imagine if your uncle passed away and promised you a fortune but the court said, “Your uncle left all his money to you but you’re going to have to *work* for it before we let you have it.” You’d be like, “Then what was the point of the will!?” That’s how it was with God’s promise to Abraham. God promised to make a great nation from Abraham, and it didn’t depend on Abraham’s work. It all depended on God.

The same thing is true for you. God’s promise to you does not depend on your work. It depends on God’s grace. You can believe that! **“¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace.** God’s promise depends on him. Thank God! If it was up to you to earn his love, his presence, his forgiveness, how would you ever know if it was enough? You could never be sure.

But as it is, you can be sure. Paul says that God's promise is **"guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all."** (Romans 4:16)

GOD'S PROMISE IS FOR SINNERS

Jesus made that abundantly clear. He sat down at a well with a woman he had no business talking to. He engaged her in conversation. He offered her living water. He offered her salvation. And it was obviously not because of her working. She had been with tons of men, and when Jesus gave her his promises, she was sleeping with a man she was not married to. But Jesus' promise didn't depend on her. It depended on him.

God's promises to you don't depend on you either. Is God going to be with you today? That depends on him. He is powerful enough to create the world and he's powerful enough to be with you. Is God going to forgive your sins? That depends on his love, which he proved when he gave up his son for you. Are you right with God? That depends on his grace, and his mercy, which are so much more reliable than your working. All God's promises are guaranteed not for Jewish people or perfect people or good people. God's promise is for everyone who believes. So believe it. It's a lot better than working for it.

Amen.