

Romans: The Good News of God

Saved by Good Works or by Faith?

Romans 4:1-5

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Saved by Good Works or by Faith?

Scripture

The October 22, 1996 headlines of *The Times* of London cried: *Lost Forever: A Nation's Heritage Looted By Its Own People*. Afghanistan's National Museum in Kabul is rubble, said the newspaper.

It once held one of the world's greatest multicultural antique collections: Persian, Indian, Chinese, Central Asian, and beyond. But Mujahidin rebels blasted into vaults and shattered display cases, looted the relics, and sold them here and there around the world for quick cash. Rockets slammed into the museum's roof, burying ancient bronzes under tons of debris. Pottery from prehistory was thrown into bags like cheap china. The Bagram collection, one of the greatest archaeological finds of the 20th century, disappeared. Nearly 40,000 coins, some of the world's oldest, vanished.

The museum, once a repository for Afghan history, became a military post, and the storied past has now been ruined by the unbridled present.

A nation has lost its history. With no history, there is no heritage. And with no heritage from the past there is no legacy for the future.

The same could happen to the church of Jesus Christ. Contemporary Christianity is interested in recent trends, current challenges, and modern methods. So am I. But nothing braces me to face these days like visiting the cloud of witnesses that comprise church history.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once observed, "If we don't know our own history, we will simply have to endure all the same mistakes, sacrifices, and absurdities all over again."

"How shall we labor with any effect to build up the church" asks Church historian Philip Schaff, "if we have no thorough

knowledge of her history? History is, and must ever continue to be, next to God's Word, the richest foundation of wisdom, and the surest guide to all successful practical activity."¹

This is one of the reasons I am going to focus on using more illustrations from history this coming year to help us understand how God works in this world and, consequently, in our lives.

Today's sermon is titled, "Saved by Good Works or by Faith?" The entire 4th chapter of Romans is devoted to Abraham, whom Paul uses as an illustration of the central biblical truth that we come into a right relationship with God by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone, and *never* by our good works.

Let's read Romans 4:1-5:

¹ What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather 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 counted to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, (Romans 4:1-5)

Introduction

Jennifer Hua identifies herself as a Christian. A 35-year-old former attorney studying Christian counseling at the Wheaton College Graduate School (Illinois), she has gone to church all her life and is active in her suburban Chicago church. She furthers her spiritual development by daily Bible reading, prayer, listening to and singing worship songs, and interacting with other Christians. And every few months, she carves out time for a spiritual retreat.

"I do all of these things because I know from past experience I need to recalibrate my mind and my heart to be in tune with

¹ Robert J. Morgan, *On This Day: 365 Amazing and Inspiring Stories About Saints, Martyrs & Heroes*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000, c1997).

God,” she says.

James Smith also identifies himself as a Christian. He attended church as a child, but his attendance was minimal as a young adult. He believes in God, occasionally attends Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan when his time-consuming job in the finance district allows, but he does not often participate in other activities to further his spiritual life. He has a Bible but rarely opens it. What leisure time he has he spends with friends, most of whom are of different faiths, and he does not believe that his God is any different from the one his Muslim friend worships.

“I don’t think that God would be a God who would shut others out of heaven because they don’t use the word ‘Christian’ to describe themselves,” he says.

The United States is described in mainstream media as largely Christian (between 70 and 80 percent, depending on the study, identify themselves as “Christian”), and compared to the rest of the world, this is certainly the case. However, not all within this vast group of Christians are alike, as the two above show.

A recent study by *Leadership Journal* suggests that of those who call themselves Christians there are five kinds. There are Active Christians (19%), Professing Christians (20%), Liturgical Christians (16%), Private Christians (24%), and Cultural Christians (21%). Of these, only Active and Professing Christians said “accepting Christ as Savior and Lord” is the key to being a Christian. That is, more than 60% do not believe that faith in Christ is essential to salvation.²

According to a Barna study last year, more than half of all adults (53%) believe that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others during his life, he will earn a place in heaven.³

There is a tremendous amount of confusion in our society about how a person comes into a right relationship with God. I am not surprised that non-Christians are confused about this. But,

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2007/004/1.19.html>.

³ <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=4>.

frankly, I am stunned that so many people who call themselves Christians are confused about such an important matter.

The confusion we are dealing with in our day is an age-old confusion however. The Apostle Paul dealt with this confusion in his day. That is why he wrote this letter to the Roman Christians.

Paul wrote this letter to the Romans to explain the good news of God. He spent several of the opening chapters explaining mankind's universal sinfulness and God's supreme wrath and condemnation of our sin. Then Paul started explaining from Romans 3:21 onwards how God provided his own righteousness to us so that we might be able to come into a right relationship with him.

As I mentioned earlier, the entire 4th chapter of Romans is devoted to Abraham, whom Paul uses as an illustration of the central biblical truth that we come into a right relationship with God by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone, and *never* by our works.

Lesson

So, today's lesson answers the question, "Are we saved by good works or by faith?"

I. We Are Not Saved by Good Works (4:1-2)

First, we are not saved by good works.

Paul begins by asking, "**What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?**" (4:1). He was asking, in effect, "Because we agree that Abraham is the supreme example of a man who was saved and in a right relationship with God, why don't we look at him carefully in order to determine how he was saved? Let's discover the basis of his salvation."

Paul is using **Abraham** as an example of a theological truth. In the previous chapter Paul has asserted that both Jew and Gentile are saved by faith (Romans 3:30). And so Paul uses **Abraham** as an example because he knew that this greatest of the Jewish patri-

archs, their **forefather**, was used by the Jews as the supreme example of salvation by works. Paul will demonstrate that, to the contrary, Scripture clearly teaches that Abraham was saved by faith alone.

Paul goes on to say in verse 2: **“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.”** Paul introduces here what we call a “condition contrary to fact.” He does not say that **Abraham was justified by works**, but rather **if Abraham was justified by works**. The language that Paul uses indicates that **Abraham** was not justified by works. Paul is envisaging a hypothetical situation that is, in fact, not the case.

And what is the case?

II. We Are Saved by Faith (4:3-5)

Second, we are saved by faith.

Paul asks, **“For what does the Scripture say?”** (4:3).

He first appeals to the Word of God, the divine and infallible truth upon which all of his arguments are based. Then, quoting Genesis 15:6, Paul writes, **“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”**

Early in the Genesis account of Abraham, which begins in Genesis 12, Moses was inspired to write of Abraham that he was made right with God *only* because of his faith. Because **Abraham believed God**, and on no other basis, his belief **was counted to him** by God as **righteousness**.

Abraham, like Paul who is writing this letter to the Romans, was sovereignly and directly chosen by God. Abraham was not searching for God when God called him to follow him. Abraham had most likely never even heard of Jehovah, the true God, and was seemingly content with his idolatrous paganism.

When Abraham was first called by God, he lived in Ur of Chaldea (cf. Genesis 11:31; 15:7), which was a thoroughly pagan and idolatrous city. Ur may have had about 300,000 inhabitants,

according to archaeologist's estimates. It was an important commercial city, located on the lower Euphrates River in modern Iraq, about a hundred miles northwest of the Persian Gulf. The residents of Ur were highly educated and proficient in such diverse areas as math, agriculture, weaving, engraving, and astronomy. The Magi, who visited Jesus in Bethlehem, most likely were from this region.

When God called Abraham, or Abram, as he was known at that time, he gave no reason for choosing him from among all other pagans. The Word of God never gives a reason for God's choice of Abraham. God chose Abraham simply because of his own divine will, which needs no further explanation or justification.

God called Abraham and said, "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).

With no guarantees but God's Word, Abraham left his business, his homeland, his friends, most of his relatives, and probably many of his possessions. He abandoned his temporal security for a future uncertainty, as far as his human eyes could see or his human mind could comprehend. The land he was promised to inherit was inhabited by pagans perhaps even more pagan and idolatrous than those of his home country. Abraham may have had only a remote idea of where the land of Canaan was, and it is possible that he had never heard of it at all. But when God called him to go there, Abraham obeyed and began the long journey.

Abraham trusted God to give him a land he had never seen, and a posterity he did not yet have. It was in response to Abraham's faith in God that it **was credited to him as righteousness**.

Abraham was simply not saved by good works. He was saved by faith. That is why the Apostle Paul then says in verses 4-5, **"Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift**

but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”

Paul makes clear that salvation is never by good works. It is always by faith.

Or perhaps I can put it this way. Good works are acceptable to God—provided they are 100% perfect. If you are able to stand before God and produce good works that are 100% perfect, then you will be able to enter into heaven.

However, the truth is that “none is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. . . no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10-12).

The only one whose good works is 100% perfect is Jesus Christ. And God the Father will apply his good works to our account, if we will receive it by faith. That is why we must look to Christ alone for salvation.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon assumed his London pastorate in 1854, at the tender age of 19-years-old. At that time, the church had 232 members. Soon so many were crowding his auditoriums that he sometimes asked his members to stay away the following Sunday to accommodate newcomers.

In later years he seldom preached to fewer than 6,000, and on one occasion his audience numbered almost 24,000—all this before the day of microphones. During his lifetime Spurgeon preached to approximately 10,000,000 people.

He also became history’s most widely-read preacher. Today there is more material written by Spurgeon than by any other Christian author of any generation. The collection of his Sunday sermons stands as the largest set of books by a single author in the history of the church. He is called the “Prince of Preachers.”

It was on this day, Sunday, January 6, 1850, that a blizzard hit England, and 15-year-old Charles was unable to reach the church he usually attended. He turned down Artillery Street and ducked into a Primitive Methodist Church, finding only a few people standing around the stove. Not even the preacher arrived.

Eventually, a thin-looking man stood up and read Isaiah 45:22, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.”

The speaker, groping for something to say, kept repeating this text.

Finally, he spied young Charles in the back. Pointing his bony finger at the teenager, he cried, “Look, young man! Look! Look to Christ!”

The young man did look, and Spurgeon later said, “As the snow fell on my road home from the little house of prayer, I thought every snowflake talked with me and told of the pardon I had found.”

Arriving home, his mother saw his expression and exclaimed, “Something wonderful has happened to you.”⁴

It had. Charles Haddon Spurgeon was saved, but not by good works. Rather, he was saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

As I close, let me suggest five practical and easy-to-understand applications from James Montgomery Boice’s commentary on Romans.⁵

First, we must affirm the importance of Scripture. Paul took three chapters of Romans to explain our great need and God’s perfect remedy for that need in Christ. And here, at the point of proving and clinching his argument, he is ready to base everything he has said on just one Old Testament verse. There is no need to speculate or argue further. For us, in the same way, any clear statement of the Bible should settle any matter to which the Bible speaks—at once and forever. It does not matter whether we like or dislike, agree or disagree with the teaching of Scripture. Our ultimate authority must always be Scripture.

⁴ Robert J. Morgan, *On This Day: 365 Amazing and Inspiring Stories About Saints, Martyrs & Heroes*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000, c1997), January 6.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans, Vol. 1: Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 435-436.

Second, trying to be saved by good works is hopeless. Abraham was a good man, even a great man. He is a model of Old Testament piety. Yet Abraham was not saved by his good works, nor *could* he be saved by them. If he could not be saved by good works, it is certain that you and I, who are far less pious and godly than he was, can be saved by them either.

Third, we can have confidence in the gospel. The Lord Jesus Christ testified to Abraham's being a saved man, even speaking on one occasion of "Abraham's side" (Luke 16:22) as a synonym for heaven. Abraham was saved! And Abraham was saved, not by some ability, godliness, or good works, but by the same gospel that is being preached today. So, we can have complete and utter confidence in that same gospel. It saved him. It will save us. It can save anybody.

Fourth, we are not saved by the quantity of our faith but by the object of our faith. Many people think that they are saved by the amount or sincerity of faith that they have. However, we are saved by the *object* of our faith. That is, Jesus, the object of our faith, is the one who saves. It is vitally important to have our faith placed in Jesus. Abraham often disobeyed God and at times demonstrated very little faith. But Abraham was not saved by the quantity of his faith but rather because of the object of his faith. His faith was in God. His faith was not in his good works. His faith was not even in his own faith. Rather, his faith was in God. That is how he was saved. And that is how we are saved.

And finally, all this is proof of Christianity's timelessness and validity. If Christianity were merely something founded by Jesus Christ some 2,000 years ago, it might be interesting but it would have no more ultimate claim upon us than the dogmas of any other human religion. But if—though it was accomplished by Jesus Christ in history some 2,000 years ago—it is actually the way of salvation established by God the Father in conjunction with his eternal Son before the world began and through which anyone who has ever been saved was saved, then it is an entirely different matter. This proves Christianity as the only true faith. Donald Grey

Barnhouse, a former pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, once wrote, “All other religions are the gropings of man after God. The faith that is in Christ is God’s revelation of truth from himself, in the terms and in the manner he wished us to have the truth.”⁶

When I talk to people to see if they understand what it means to be a Christian, I often ask the question, “Suppose you were to die tonight and stand before God, and he were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ what would you say?”

The answer I get to that question is very revealing. Do you know that there are basically only two answers? One answer is faith in Jesus Christ. The other answer is good works. And, of course, only faith in Jesus Christ gets a person into heaven.

In a *Reader’s Digest* interview in 2001, Muhammad Ali said, “One day we’re all going to die, and God is going to judge us—[our] good deeds and bad deeds. If the bad outweighs the good, you go to hell. If the good outweighs the bad, you go to heaven.”⁷

Muhammad Ali is one of the 53% of adults I mentioned earlier who believe that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others in his life, then he will earn a place in heaven. Unfortunately, this is profoundly wrong.

No one, not even Abraham, is saved by good works. The only way to be saved is by faith alone in Christ.

If you have never done so, I urge you today, as the thin-looking man did on this day in 1850 to Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Look, young man! Look! Look to Christ!”

If you do so, you will be saved. Amen.

⁶ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *God’s Remedy: Exposition of Bible Doctrines, Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 3, *Romans 3:21-4:25* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1954), p. 195.

⁷ “Ali,” *Reader’s Digest* (December 2001), 93.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAAYER:

Our Father in heaven, we are so prone to trust in our own good works as the basis of our salvation.

But your Word teaches us that we are saved by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone, and never by our good works.

O God, grant salvation to that person today who looks to Christ for salvation.

And all of this I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.