

*What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? <sup>2</sup> If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. <sup>3</sup> What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

*<sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. <sup>5</sup> However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.*

*<sup>13</sup> It was not through the 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. <sup>14</sup> For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, <sup>15</sup> because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.*

*<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. <sup>17</sup> As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not. (Romans 4:1-5; 13-17)*

### **Sermon Theme: Have No Doubt, Grace is God’s Gift**

You go into the store to make a purchase. You pull out your card, slide it through or place it in the chip reader, and then you wait. You see those dots moving across the screen. You know there shouldn’t be any trouble. You are pretty sure there should be some money in the account. But, if you are like me, there’s split-second of doubt. What-if? Finally, the one word you need to see pops up: “Approved.” Sigh of relief. Now you can go about your day.

Such a small thing and, yet, just that little doubt can leave us with a weird feeling. Doubt is powerful. It paralyzes and leaves us feeling powerless. You’re stuck trying to figure out what you should do next. There’s more questions than answers. Doubt with how much money is available is just one of many situations that are as equally nerve-racking. Doubt of the future and what tomorrow will bring. Doubt with your health and if that sickness is going to hit. Doubt in your family life and personal life—is everything actually okay like you say it is? The big question of, “What if?” hangs over our heads. And the devil loves it. If he can’t convince us to be okay in a certain sin, the devil flips the script and gives plenty of evidence for why we should doubt. Because with these seeds of doubt he can lead us to the thing that he wants more so than anything else. He wants you to doubt your relationship and status before God. And, instead of turning to God, when we have these questions and doubt we tend to look in the wrong places for answers.

That’s what some of the Jews in Paul’s day are doing. They thought they had the answer already figured out. They had a right relationship with God because of the works they would do.

They had God's Law and believe that they were keeping it well enough, so they are right with God, they believed. Their proof? Look at our ancestor Abraham, the Father of the Jewish Nation. They believed he did it; therefore, they could too. In their minds, Abraham is not only a good guy, he's great. That's why God gives him the promise that a great nation would come from his line. That's why God gave him the gift of this promise that all nations would be blessed through him; that is, the Savior of the world would come from Abraham's line.

And so, Paul says, let's use Father Abraham. Let's see if what you believe can be true. He readily admits that Abraham was a standout guy. Paul says, "**If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about.**" In the eyes of the world around him, he had something he could boast about. But that's where it stops. "**But not before God,**" Paul continues.

You see, the Jews were confused about this promise. What they saw as a reward for good works, in reality was a gift from God. Mankind wants to believe that God owes us something. It kills our sinful nature to believe that we deserve nothing. You hear it whenever life gets hard. You feel it when the budget isn't where you want it to be. You wrestle with it when work isn't going the way you want it to. You deal with it when your friends aren't treating you the way they should. You grapple with it when you raised your kids one way and they turn to do the opposite.

How doesn't God owe me something? You put in the extra hours to make sure you provide for your family. You did what mom and dad told you. You did what your boss wanted you to do. You run around all over the place so your children can have all these different experiences. You make sacrifices to your life plans because you know that's not what is best right now. You do what needs to be done while trying your best to live a godly life and watching out for not just family but other people who need help too!

There are many good things you do. There are many good things that other people do. There's much that you can boast about and people will say, "They're good people." But that does not justify you before God. It was that way for Abraham. It's that way for you, me, for all people.

Quoting from the Old Testament Paul writes in v.3, "**Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.**" It wasn't his actions that convinced God to give him this promise. The promise is a gift. It's free with no strings attached. Believing is not a work. It's done in you and to you. It's receiving a promised gift. And God, in his love, then credits Abraham. In God's accounting books, the one column has the list of the debts of sins with Abraham's own shortcomings and failures. But God erases the debt by crediting righteousness to him. It's a gift. And by faith, not works, Abraham receives it.

Righteousness is having a right standing and relationship with God. God holds nothing against you or over your head. It's not something you receive because you did something. It's a gift God credits to the individual's account and received by faith. Therefore, because it's a gift, it

can't be received by you doing something—works. Paul explains in v.4, **“Now to the one who works wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation.”** A gift stops being a gift when you have to work to have it or to keep it. Earning something by work or given as a reward is never a gift.

But, if you insist on trying to achieve a right status with God by doing something, **“If,”** Paul says, **“those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath.”**

So here is God's promise to you. He promises that he sent Jesus to do the work for you. Jesus willingly comes as your substitute and resists all of sin and temptation for you. He goes to the cross where he carries your sins and dies crushing the devil's head with his victory on the cross. God promises that this was the exact price that was needed to pay for your debt of sin. He even gives you the receipt and proof of purchase with the empty tomb. Because Jesus lives, we know God's promise is true. God now promises that because he did not spare his own Son there are no accusations of sins committed that can be counted against you in his court room. Already at the cross God justifies you; that means he declares you not guilty of any sin. And he promises you this is yours at your baptism. With the water and the word poured over your head you are saved and have a clean conscience before Him. Even the faith to believe doesn't come from us. God sends the Holy Spirit working in that Word to create faith that reaches out, grabs onto those promises and makes it your own. Those are God's promises to you.

And what do we do? We add, **“But.”** We say Jesus fulfilled all of God commands, **but** we need to make sure we follow the commandments. We have God's love, **but** we still need to show that we love him. God forgives us completely, **but** I need to show my appreciation.

Now, there's a way to understand those statements correctly. But what it sounds like, the impression it can leave, is that God's promise is either not enough or it can be taken away. It's the idea that if I don't do something to show God how much I appreciate his love, then he's not going to be happy with me. That's Law—you doing something to have or keep this gift.

If that's not bad enough, when we depend on the law—what we can do—faith means nothing and promise is worthless. One might say, **“We want to make sure that we live good lives. We want to make sure to show our appreciation for God's love. We don't want anyone to take it for granted.”** But in your zealous attempt to make up for God's favor and show how you deserve it, you are spitting on the gift. You are saying God's promise is not good enough. You are saying that Jesus didn't do enough on the cross. You are still trying to live by the law.

Understand correctly, God's law—his expectations for your life—is still good, right, and true. It's still very much needed in our lives while we are on this earth. But the Law only produces wrath. It shows you where you have failed and what a futile attempt it is to try and be saved by it. Even while it is guiding us in our Christian lives it still produces wrath and frustration because we see the truth: we are not good enough on our own to have a right status with God. If

we could, faith means nothing. What do you need to believe in besides yourself? Then the promise is worthless. Who needs a promise if you have even a fraction of a percent relying on you to have your sins paid for? Just try harder. Do better.

And that's where doubt settles in. You know you try really hard to keep those commandments. But you keep on falling. You know that you need to do better. But then you fall again and the devil comes whispering, "Are you sure God still loves you? Are you sure God wants to hear you asking for forgiveness again?" More doubts. More what-ifs. Because no matter how much we try and tell ourselves, we know we can't do enough.

Therefore, Paul says, "**The promise comes by faith.**" God already makes the promise. Jesus already declares you not guilty when he says, "It is finished." He's telling you, "The work is already done. There's nothing more for you to do. I already did it all. Stop trying to make up for your sins. I did with my perfect life and death. Grace is love that you do not deserve, so stop trying to make yourself deserve it. It's already yours. I know your response to this love is not always what it should be, but God justifies the ungodly. That means you! I accept you, even though you feel unacceptable. I love you, even though you feel unlovable. Stop trying to earn my approval. Stop trying to impress me. I already am. I never get tired of forgiving you."

Have no doubt, the God who gives life to the dead has taken you and made you alive. That's what he did in Baptism. He creates the hand of faith, puts in these promises, and closes your fingers to make it your own. These promises come by faith so that they are yours by grace and you can trust they are guaranteed. In the onslaught of doubt and "what-ifs", let God be God. For Him, there is no question what your status is. It's written in Jesus' blood and revealed with our risen from the dead Savior. You are already God-pleasing in God's sight; that's why we want to live as he has made us to be. We already have God's love, so now we can love our neighbor with no strings attached. God uses your hands and your voice to serve your neighbor and bring glory to his name so that more come to know the free gift that Jesus has won for them.

God gives us all things not because we have earned or deserved it, but because he is our good and merciful Father in heaven. That means he does not treat us as our sins deserve but according to his promise. Have no doubt, God's love is still your free gift. Amen.