



As many of you know by now, this past week we lost a dear friend and one of the great men of this church, Vicente Quintana. It was quite a shock to me and I know to many of you. We pray for his wife Janell and his two daughters, Camille and Sarah, as well as their children. Vicente was one of a handful of people who made this church what it is today. He showed up at CPC about 25 years ago, having just got out of prison. He came to Christ and then helped start our Higher Power ministry and was a fixture in the recovery community. He will be greatly missed.

And when something like this happens, we can't help but think of our own lives and how fragile we are. The Bible likens each of our lives to a vapor or a mist. James wrote, *"You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes"* (Jms 4:14). The day will come when it won't be Vicente of someone we else know; it will be us. On that day we'll stand before our Creator and give an account of ourselves. Heb 9:27 says, *"People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment."*

It's been my experience that when you mention a day of judgment to people, their thoughts are many and varied. Some look forward to it, others fear it. Some feel hopeful, others feel hopeless. Some think they stand a chance, others wonder if they have any chance at all. The fact is, most people don't like to think about it. They dread the idea of standing before God with their life as an open book. It feels like showing up for a test knowing you haven't prepared; knowing you don't have the answers.

I want us to look at a passage of Scripture today that tells us how on that day we can stand before God with nothing to fear. In fact, it explains how we can stand before God as perfect as his own Son Jesus stands. The passage I'm referring to is Romans 4. Here, the apostle Paul uses Abraham as an example for all of us of how we can stand before a Holy God, the Judge of all the earth, with nothing to be ashamed of.

You might wonder, why Abraham? We know Paul was writing to a church that consisted of both Jews and Gentiles. The example of Abraham would have spoken powerfully to both. Today, even Muslims consider him a prophet and a forefather through the line of Ishmael. But Abraham has always been revered as the father of the Jewish people through the line of Isaac. And it's interesting, even though Abraham lived hundreds of years before the law was given to Moses, they believed Abraham obeyed the law in advance. They believed if there was anybody who could stand before a holy God it was him. And they could point to several

things. Here was a man who was willing to pick up and leave all that was familiar to him and obey God's call to go to an unknown land (Gen 12). Here was a man who was willing to obey God and circumcise not only himself but all the males eight days old and up (Gen 17). Here was a man willing to sacrifice his son Isaac on the altar in obedience to God (Gen 22). If any man could stand before God, it was Abraham.

Have you ever wondered what questions God will ask you on that day? Abraham's life teaches us there are five questions God will **not** ask you when you stand before him. What's interesting is these are questions most people are convinced he **will** ask.

### Abraham Teaches Us that God Will Not Ask Us Five Questions

#### How many good works have you done?

The first question God won't ask is, How many good works have you done? Look what Paul says in verses 1–5:

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

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

Paul has been talking in chapter 3 about how we can stand righteous before a holy God. So he asks, What does Abraham teach us about this matter? He says Abraham teaches us we're not made righteous or justified by good works, but rather by faith; by trusting God who justifies the ungodly. And he proves that by quoting from the Old Testament Scripture, specifically Genesis 15:6. Remember God had promised Abraham he'd be the father of a great nation. But there he was, an aging man with an aging wife and no children; no heir. When Abraham complained to God about it, God took him outside one night and said, *"Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them."* Then God said, *"So shall your offspring be."* And then the writer said something very important, *"Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness"* (Gen 15:5-6).

Abraham wasn't saved by just believing **in** God, rather he **believed** God; he believed God's promise. He transferred his trust from his own efforts to the promise of God. He believed it. You

can have a strong faith that God exists. You can believe the Bible is God's Word. You can come to church and sing the songs. Yet all the while you can be trying to be your own Savior and justifier by trusting in your own religious performance. And by the way, believing or trusting in God's promise is **not** a work we can take credit for. The promise isn't something we earn, it's something we receive as a gift. The writer says, God credited that faith to him as righteousness. That word "credited" is used repeatedly in this passage. It's an accounting term meaning "to count as" or "to credit" something to your account that wasn't there before. Imagine you keep a zero balance on your credit card and you get your statement in the mail and it says you've been credited \$1000. I know that sounds ridiculous. Who'd do that? Why would they do that? But Paul says that's what happened to those who believe. You're credited not with \$1000 but with perfect righteousness; a righteous standing before God. That's why God won't ask, "How many righteous deeds have you done?" Because it won't matter. God credits us with a righteousness apart from anything we do or anything we are.

Paul backs this up not just with Old Testament Scripture but with two arguments. First, he says if it was any other way then we'd have something to boast about, but no one can boast before God. He can hardly imagine the thought of someone standing before God, listing all of his good works and then expecting God to congratulate him! But that's not all, Paul also says if it's all about your good works, then God actually owes you something, like wages. This is what he brings out verses 4-5. If God were to accept you on the basis of your good works, all he'd be doing is paying a debt, giving you something he owes you. But God doesn't owe anyone anything. He's no one's debtor.

All of this reminds me of when Lynn and I got married. We were 21 years old, still in college, and had no money. So my parents paid for our honeymoon and my dad gave us his credit card to use. We had a great time! Who wouldn't? But towards the end of the trip we realized we should get my mom and dad a thank you gift. So we found something really nice to bring home for them, which we bought and paid for with my dad's credit card! Needless to say, we couldn't boast about that gift because we didn't pay for it. My parents didn't even owe us as much as even a thank you when it was all said and done! It's the same thing with God. We have nothing to offer him that he didn't pay for; nothing that obligates him to us in any way. That's why God won't ask us, How many good works have you done?

### **How many sins have you committed?**

The second question God won't ask is How many sins have you committed? Look what Paul says next in verses 6-8:

**David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:**

**"Blessed are those**

**whose transgressions are forgiven,  
whose sins are covered.**

**Blessed is the one**

**whose sin the Lord will never count against them."**

Paul temporarily leaves the example of Abraham and points to King David. David basically says the same thing as Abraham about all this. He quotes David from Psalm 32:1-2. This was one of the poems David wrote after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and set up her husband to be killed in battle. David repented and wrote about the blessings of having your sins forgiven and covered. Notice he speaks of the one "whose sin the Lord will never COUNT against him." That word "count" (*logizomai*) is the same word he used before when he said God "credits" the believer with righteousness. So there's a positive crediting of something to our account, but there's also a flip-side to that as he doesn't credit sin to our account. This is like being maxed out on your credit card and having a bunch of late charges to go with it and getting a statement in the mail that says it's all been wiped clean. Someone paid your debt; you owe nothing. So it's actually possible to be righteous and a sinner at the same time!

Popular author and shame researcher Brené Brown talked about coming back to church after years away and the moment "the whole Jesus thing" finally clicked. She said: "People would want love to be unicorns and rainbows. So then you send Jesus, and people say, 'Oh my god, love is hard, love is sacrifice, love is trouble, love is rebellious.' As Leonard Cohen sings, 'Love is not a victory march ... it's a broken hallelujah.' Love isn't hearts and bows. It is very controversial. In order for forgiveness to really happen, something has to die. Whether it's your expectations of a person, or your idea about who you are. There has to be a death for forgiveness to happen. In all of these faith communities where forgiveness is easy, and love is easy, there's not enough blood on the floor to make sense of that."

The reason why we can know forgiveness is because the blood on the floor is Christ's own. And it's only because of his shed blood that the Father won't ask, "How many sins have you committed?"

### **Have you completed the necessary ritual?**

A third question God will not ask is, Have you completed the necessary ritual? Of course, for the Jews that ritual was traced back to Abraham and God's command to be circumcised. Look at verses 9-12:

**Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be**

**credited to them. And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.**

He asks if this blessing of forgiveness David wrote about is only for the circumcised, or is it also for the uncircumcised? Of course the Jewish people would have said it was only for the circumcised. Circumcision was the mark of membership in the Jewish nation for men and the wives and daughters they represented. It was like a Passport that confirmed your citizenship. But Paul makes a very important point straight from the Old Testament Scripture—this righteousness Abraham received by faith happened while he was still uncircumcised. In fact, Genesis 15, when Abraham was declared righteous by faith, took place 13 years prior to Genesis 17 when he was circumcised. So why did he get circumcised? He says Abraham received circumcision not to be made righteous but as a sign and seal of the righteousness he was already given by faith. Based on that Paul concludes Abraham is the father of all who believe whether they're circumcised or not. The central question isn't, have you completed the necessary ritual? But rather, are you walking in Abraham's footsteps of faith?

I was raised in a church where I was taught if I completed certain rites and rituals I'd be acceptable to God. It started with being baptized as an infant. Then you took your first communion. And then you began to participate in confession. Finally, you were confirmed at age 13. Now I did all of that without having any real interest in God at all. But I believed, if I ever had to stand before a holy God, I'd be okay because I'd completed the necessary rituals.

It reminds me of a story recently about a Jewish man who moved to a Catholic neighborhood. Every Friday the Catholics would go crazy because they could only eat fish on Fridays, and while they were sadly eating their fish, the Jewish man was outside barbecuing steaks. So the Catholics decided they had to convert this guy. After much pleading they succeeded and he decided to switch to Catholicism. So they took him to a local priest who sprinkled holy water on him and intoned, "Born a Jew, raised a Jew, now a Catholic." The Catholics were ecstatic! No more delicious but maddening smells on Friday night, or so they thought. The very next Friday there was again the smell of steak wafting through the air. The Catholics immediately ran to the Jew's home to remind him of his new duty not to eat meat on Friday. When they arrived at his house, lo and behold, there he was standing over his steak, sprinkling holy water on it, and saying, "Born a cow, raised a cow, now a fish."

That's ritual without reality, and that's what Paul is arguing against. That doesn't mean there's anything wrong with rituals. In fact, rituals like the Lord's Supper and Baptism can enrich our relationship with God, but they were never meant to be a substitute for the real thing. When you stand before God he'll not

ask, "Have you been taken communion lately? Have you been to confession?" but rather "Have you put your trust in my Son?"

### **Have you kept my laws?**

The fourth question God will not ask when we stand before him is, Have you kept my laws? Look at verses 13–15:

**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. For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.**

Remember the law came through Moses around 500 years after Abraham. Yet the Jews still believed that somehow Abraham kept the law, even before it was given. But Paul says the promise to Abraham and his descendants that he'd be heir to the world wasn't through the law but through a promise; a promise he believed and through which God declared him righteous. Paul says, if those who are of the law are heirs, the promise is voided. Why? Because law and promise belong to different categories and are incompatible. In the law God says, "You shall" and demands obedience. But in the promise God says, "I will" and invites faith. The law brings wrath because we can't live up to it. He then adds "and where there is no law, there is no transgression." He's not saying before the law there was no sin or guilt, but rather the existence of the law means when you break it you're deliberately crossing a known boundary. If I trespass on private property. I'm guilty of trespassing. But if I see a sign saying, "Private Property. Keep Out," and I trespass anyway, then I transgress in a different way. I knew the law explicitly and broke it. So knowing the law can't make us heirs; it just makes us doubly guilty.

What's both sad and funny at the same time is that even those who consider themselves unreligious find this to be true. Benjamin Franklin wasn't a particularly religious man. But he decided to live according to 13 virtues including:

- » Silence: Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
- » Frugality: Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; that is, waste nothing.
- » Industry: Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
- » Tranquility: Be not disturbed at trifles or accidents common or unavoidable."

He had a book with a page for each virtue where he'd record his defects. He chose a different virtue to work on each week, noting every mistake, starting over every 13 weeks to cycle through the list four times a year. For decades, Franklin carried his little book with him, striving for a clean 13-week cycle. But as soon as he made progress, he found he struggled with another defect:

pride. How do you subdue pride? Then when felt he'd overcome it, he'd be proud of his humility. You see, God won't ask, have you kept my laws, because no one can keep them, but rather he'll ask, have you believed my promise?

### Are you of the right ethnicity?

There's one more question God won't ask us: Are you of the right ethnicity? Look at verses 16–17a:

**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. As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations."**

Paul talks about "all Abraham's offspring." These are all those who have the faith of Abraham, regardless of whether we're Jewish or not. Paul then calls Abraham "the father of us all" and quotes Gen. 17:5, "*A father of many nations I have made you.*" Who can call Abraham their father? It's not about ethnicity; it's about faith. That means every tribe, every nation and every tongue can become sons and daughters of Abraham.

This has tremendous implications for missions. We typically think of missions as just one thing the church does among many other things. But God's promise to Abraham is the key to understanding missions. From the start it was God's plan to reach beyond the Jews to all the nations and tribes of the earth. So God's promise to Abraham is being fulfilled when we send out mission teams and support missionaries all over the world. And God will keep his promise to Abraham to make him the father of many nations and for all the nations of the earth to be blessed by him until the day comes when a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, are standing before the throne and before the Lamb (Rev. 7:9-10). Then God will turn to Abraham and say, "Mission accomplished! All nations I promised; all nations it is!" You see, that's God's big story. And we get to be a part of it. But when we like Israel forget who we are and why we're here—to participate in the mission of God—then we've lost sight of who our father is. Then church becomes like a country club that exists for the benefit of the members. So when you stand before his throne he'll not ask if you're of the right ethnicity but are you reaching beyond your own ethnicity to reach others?

Five questions God will not ask when you stand before him:

- "How many good works have you done?"

• "How many sins have you committed?" • "Have you completed the necessary ritual?"

• "Have you kept my laws?"

• "Are you of the right ethnicity?"

And do you know what this means for us who embrace this?

• It means first there's no boasting. Our righteousness is credited. So we can give all the glory to God and walk in hopeful humility before him and others.

• Second, it means there's no cowering. We know we're sinful, but we know our sins are covered; not counted. So instead of cowering before God we can enter his presence with confidence and joy and security.

• Third, it means no empty rituals. Whatever rites and rituals you choose to practice, make sure they enhance your faith in Jesus and your understanding of the gospel.

• Fourth, it means no legalism. Keeping the rules isn't the point. That only brings condemnation.

• Finally, it means no partiality. As a son or daughter of Abraham you're part of the mission of God to reach every nation, tribe, people and language so that we can all stand before the throne and the Lamb.

The only way any of us can stand before him isn't because of anything we've done. It's all because of what he's done on our behalf. During an interview before his 50th college reunion, former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg confessed that his mortality has started dawning on him, at 72. He also said that he's been sobered by how many of his former classmates have passed away. But the author of the interview concluded, "But if Bloomberg senses that he may not have as much time left as he would like, he has little doubt about what would await him at a Judgment Day. Pointing to his work on gun safety, obesity and smoking cessation, he said with a grin: "I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close."

That, dear friends, is the antithesis of what the Bible says. Apart from the righteousness that is received as a gift by faith, no one can stand blameless before a holy God and no one can earn their place in heaven. It's not even close.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No. 1418–9