



St. Paul's Lutheran Church
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The Epistle of Romans

The Justification of the Ungodly

Chapter 4 Verses 1-8

Abraham stands at the beginning of the history of Israel. With that said, how was Abraham justified? Was it through works or faith? You see, works and faith are quite the opposite. Works are active – they require us to *do* something. Faith, on the other hand, is passive – it *receives* something. So, with Abraham, was it works or faith? It was faith. Indeed, we hear from the Apostle Paul that Abraham was reckoned as righteous because of faith – not works.

Regarding faith, though, does faith originate with us? Is faith our 'decision' or our 'will-power' to reach up to God? Absolutely not! Faith – on its own - is empty, poor, and beggarly. In fact, without the Word of God, faith cannot come into existence. Faith is that which 'receives' the promises of God; faith is created by the promise in which it receives. It is not our contribution to God. Faith is like a beggar's open hand.

So, be careful of pastors and preachers who talk a lot about faith and never about Jesus and the promises of God. If you want faith, preach Jesus. If you want faith to be strengthened, do not talk about ifaith but talk about Jesus.

Why? Because faith must always have an object. Faith cannot stand alone but is always connected to something – Someone.

And that is why God counts faith as righteous – because faith clings to the Righteous One – Jesus.

All of this brings up an interesting discussion. If faith is created in us by Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacraments, how do we understand the Word? Well, it is quite simple. The Word of God is not something that we human beings must act upon, but it is something that acts upon us. (*As is often said in confirmation, "We don't read the Bible, the Bible reads us!"*) In other words, God's Word can be rightly distinguished as Law and Gospel. The Law brings about repentance in mankind. The Gospel brings about faith in mankind. This

happens as the Holy Spirit works through the Word. And so, we cannot take credit for any of this. We are passive ungodly recipients receiving the work of God upon us – repentance and faith.

But if faith passively receives, does that mean that we do nothing? Are we just motionless logs and rocks? Martin Luther comments on this saying, "Faith is a divine work in us. It changes us and makes us to be born anew of God. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different people, in heart and spirit and mind and power, and it brings the Holy Spirit. Oh, [faith] is living, busy, active, mighty thing . . . And so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the questions arises, it has already done them, and is always doing them."

Think about it this way: to create a tree, you first need a seed. And then you need water and sunlight. The same is for us as Christians. Baptism is the seed that takes us from darkness to light. After baptism, we need water and sunlight (the Word and Communion). Now, back to the tree. If we want to have good fruit we do not yell at the tree to produce more fruit; we instead make sure that the tree is pruned of bad branches (i.e., via the Law) and then given water and sunlight (i.e., Word and Communion). Trees that are properly pruned and given plenty of water and sunlight bring forth great fruit! However, simply yelling at a tree to produce more fruit without giving it water and sunlight and without pruning it, accomplishes nothing. Alas, how many pastors preach in ways that do not give the flock the water and sunlight of the Gospel but simply yell at them to produce fruit. Such foolishness! Such spiritual abuse!



