

Series: Extreme Make Over
Text: Romans 4:13-25

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on June 17th, 2007 at
Northminster Presbyterian Church.

Two weeks ago we began our summer preaching series on the Letter of Paul to the Romans. Week by week and chapter by chapter we will make our way through this letter which is still used by seminaries as a primary study guide in biblical theology for first year students. It is so used not because of the stories told of the life and ministry of Jesus. This is the purpose of the books of the Bible we call the Gospels. Instead, Paul is working out a complete understanding of how the work which God completed in Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of a Messiah.

To help you on our journey, I have developed a reading plan as well as a scripture memorization plan that will be available each week through the end of our series. We hope to have it available for you on our web site if you are traveling, and we commend it to you as a way to stay current while you are away. It is also available in the gathering space.

After the first week's message on justification by faith, I received a few comments from those who feared that the grace of which I spoke sounded like anything goes. One of you asked the question, *"What would our society be without rules? If everyone is free, doesn't freedom become license to do whatever feels good?"*

Father Robert Capon had a great response to such a comment when he was similarly challenged after he preached a sermon on justification by faith alone:

"You're worried about permissiveness—about the way the preaching of grace seems to say its okay to do all kinds of terrible things as long as you just walk in afterward and take the free gift of God's forgiveness..."

"While you and I may be worried about seeming to give permission, Jesus apparently wasn't. He wasn't afraid of giving the prodigal son a kiss instead of a lecture, a party instead of probation; and he proved that by bringing in the elder brother at the end of the story and having him raise pretty much the same objections you do. He's angry about the party. He complains that

his father is lowering standards and ignoring virtue—that music, dancing, and a fattened calf are, in effect, just so many permissions to break the law. And to that, Jesus has the father say only one thing: "Cut that out! We're not playing good boys and bad boys anymore. Your brother was dead and he's alive again. The name of the game from now on is resurrection, not bookkeeping." (Citation: Robert Farrar Capon, Between Noon and Three. Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 7.)

Today we are in the fourth chapter of Romans, and I'd like to read it again, this time from Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage because the language is simply easier to digest. So now I invite you to listen for the word of God in Romans 4 beginning at the 13th verse:

¹³That famous promise God gave Abraham—that he and his children would possess the earth—was not given because of something Abraham did or would do. It was based on God's decision to put everything together for him, which Abraham then entered when he believed. ¹⁴If those who get what God gives them only get it by doing everything they are told to do and filling out all the right forms properly signed, that eliminates personal trust completely and turns the promise into an ironclad contract! That's not a holy promise; that's a business deal. ¹⁵A contract drawn up by a hard-nosed lawyer and with plenty of fine print only makes sure that you will never be able to collect. But if there is no contract in the first place, simply a promise—and God's promise at that—you can't break it.

¹⁶This is why the fulfillment of God's promise depends entirely on trusting God and his way, and then simply embracing him and what he does. God's promise arrives as pure gift. That's the only way everyone can be sure to get in on it, those who keep the religious traditions and those who have never heard of them. For Abraham is father of us all. He is not our racial father—that's reading the story backwards. He is our faith father.

¹⁷We call Abraham "father" not because he got God's attention by living like a saint, but because God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody. Isn't that what we've always read in Scripture, God saying to Abraham, "I set you up as father of many peoples"? Abraham was first named "father" and then became a father because he dared to trust God to do what only God could do: raise the dead to life, with a word make something out of nothing. ¹⁸When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding to live not on the basis of what he saw he

couldn't do but on what God said he would do. And so he was made father of a multitude of peoples. God himself said to him, "You're going to have a big family, Abraham!"

¹⁹Abraham didn't focus on his own impotence and say, "It's hopeless. This hundred-year-old body could never father a child." Nor did he survey Sarah's decades of infertility and give up. ²⁰He didn't tiptoe around God's promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged into the promise and came up strong, ready for God, ²¹sure that God would make good on what he had said. ²²That's why it is said, "Abraham was declared fit before God by trusting God to set him right." ²³But it's not just Abraham; ²⁴it's also us! The same thing gets said about us when we embrace and believe the One who brought Jesus to life when the conditions were equally hopeless. ²⁵The sacrificed Jesus made us fit for God, set us right with God.

In the fourth chapter of Romans Paul returns to the theme that is perhaps the most important theme of his letter: justification by faith alone. Like the famous line of Yogi Berra, *"It's déjà vu all over again."* This week's text deals with the same subject as our first venture into Romans, but it approaches it from a different perspective. He uses Abraham as a model, and don't you love the language that Peterson uses in his translation: *²⁰He didn't tiptoe around God's promise asking cautiously skeptical questions. He plunged into the promise and came up strong, ready for God, ²¹sure that God would make good on what he had said...* I love that image of plunging into the promise. It is summer, and any of you who go to the shore know that there are people who stand on the edge of the sea timid of the water, and there are those who just plunge in and enjoy its refreshing coolness. That is what Abraham did with the grace of God, and Paul uses this venerable biblical character's response to the grace of God to remind us that we are to do the same.

It answers the age-old question which has haunted men and women of faith for millennia: How can we assure ourselves that we are in good standing with God? If we work hard enough; if we are good enough; if we obey all the rules; if we give away all our money; will any or all of these things assure us that our future is assured and that it will be in the presence of God?

Paul says we are saved by grace alone. How do you respond to this statement? ***There is nothing you can do that will make God love us***

more, and there is nothing you can do that will make God love you less. Allow me to say that again: There is nothing you can do that will make God love us more, and there is nothing you can do that will make God love you less.

I believe the need Paul is addressing here is as contemporary for us today as it was for those he was addressing the first century. It is the question that most people are wrestling with each time they approach the church at significant transition points in their lives: How can I be assured of the love of God?

When a couple comes to have their child baptized, most of them do it because they want to affirm that a Christian home will help them raise their child to do the right things. Many believe that raising a child in the Christian faith will protect them from all the violence and sexual promiscuity they see in the culture in which we live. So they baptize the child hoping that this will help that child to know right from wrong; good from evil; and will keep that child safe.

When young people come for pre-marriage preparation, they speak of their amazement in finding someone who accepts them with an unconditional love they never thought they would experience. Even though they may have been on a sabbatical from church participation, they want to say their vows in church because they believe that, somehow, vows said in church make marriages last.

When a child is sick, the parents ask themselves what they did wrong that their child should have to suffer. Why is God allowing this to happen?

When someone loses their job or goes through a financial setback, they want to know if it is God's way of punishing them for something they have done wrong.

When someone is dying, they want to know if the promise of everlasting life can be trusted.

Our more conservative brothers and sisters in the faith have used these kinds of concerns as negative motivators for people to accept Christ as their savior and put their houses in order. However, Paul points to the faith of Abraham as a model: Getting right with God is not about what we have done. It is about what God has done.

William Barclay summarizes his argument well. Paul comes at a right relationship with God from the perspective of a Jewish religious leader who sees things in black and white. He sees two mutually exclusive ways of trying to establish a right relationship with God. On the one hand there was a dependence on human effort. On the other hand there was dependence on divine grace. On the one hand there was the constant battle to obey the rules. On the other hand there was the faith that simply takes God at his word. On the one hand are words like covenant, faith and grace. On the other hand are words like law, transgression and wrath. (*Daily Study Bible: Romans, p. 68-69*)

For his Jewish audience, he uses Abraham to prove text his point. Abraham did not earn his way into God's favor. It was not Abraham's perfection that earned him a right relationship with God. It was his faith in the promise of God and his willingness to act on that faith. This is why I chose to title this sermon: *Those whom God chooses, God uses.*

Dr. Thomas Hufty, professor of Youth Ministry at Hannibal-LaGrange College in Hanibal, Missouri, taught his class an object lesson in the spring of 2002. On the day of the final examination he came into the class and said he would review what would be on the examination before they actually took the test. Most of his review came right from the study guide, but there were some things he was reviewing that they had never heard. When questioned about it, he said they were in the book and the students were responsible for everything in the book. There's no arguing with that.

Finally it was time to take the test. "Leave them face down on the desk until everyone has one, and I'll tell you to start," Dr. Hufty instructed.

When students turned the tests over, to their astonishment every answer on the test was filled in. Their names were even written on the exam in red ink. The bottom of the last page said: *"This is the end of the exam. All the answers on your test are correct. You will receive an A on the final exam. The reason you passed the test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test did not help you get the A. You have just experienced...grace."*

Dr. Hufty then went around the room and asked each student individually, *"What is your grade? Do you deserve the grade you are receiving? How*

much did all your studying for this exam help you achieve your final grade?"

Then he said, "Some things you learn from lectures, some things you learn from research, but some things you can only learn from experience. You've just experienced grace. One hundred years from now, with Jesus Christ as your Savior, your name will be written down in a book, and you will have had nothing to do with writing it there. That will be the ultimate grace experience." (Citation: Denise Banderman, Hannibal, Missouri)

"Some things you learn from lectures, some things you learn from research, but some things you can only learn from experience." There is nothing you can do that will make God love you more, and there is nothing you can do that will make God love you less.

My personal favorite way to illustrate grace goes like this: Two old friends met for breakfast one day at a Southern restaurant. The one from the north ordered traditional ham 'n eggs. After being served, he pointed to his plate and asked, "What's this?" "Grits," the waiter replied. "But I didn't order grits!" "Sir, you don't order grits. Grits just comes." Likewise, we don't order grace. Grace just comes.

Every Sunday you come here to experience the grace of God. The first Sunday of the month you experience it at the table which Christ prepared for us. "this is my body, given for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you." This is the grace of God made visible for you. There is nothing we can do that will make god love us more than what God ahs already done at the table. Although we don't celebrate communion every Sunday, each Sunday you are asked to remember and receive the gift of God's grace so that you may be free to live in Christ's service.