

Get Right with God Romans 4:1-8, 13-17 Lent 2A17

Have you made yourself right with God? Judging by the content of their pastor's funeral sermon about them, many believe they have. If I were to write your funeral sermon, what should I include? What would make you right with God, or as Paul put it, what about you would God count as righteousness before Him? I would note what your spouse or close friend or family would want me to include.

Let's call you George. Your family would tell me, "Don't forget that George was a good provider, Pastor. He really loved his grandkids and they adored him. Be sure to mention that he was so generous and always had a kind word to say about everyone. And who in the community wasn't touched by all the hours George volunteered, always ready to lend a hand or to chair a committee for charity. Who did more for this church than he did? I think George held every office in the church, two or three times!"

Quite the list we've got there. As I am writing it down, I would be paraphrasing St. Paul in my mind, "Old George certainly had something to boast about, but not before God." Not before God. He is the one that counts, and He is the One who holds the key to heaven.

The desire for heaven, and not hell, drives us to make ourselves right with God. We justify ourselves by our good works or by excusing our errors so that they don't count against us. That's been around since the beginning.

"That woman you gave me, Lord, she gave me the fruit, and I ate." Adam's masterful excuse blamed God and Eve at the same time. Then there is this: "Mommy, I didn't break the vase, the baby pushed me into it. Officer, I had to speed, I was running late for a meeting *at the church*. Pastor, we're getting a divorce. We're not in love anymore." We always have an excuse, whether the matter is small or big. We want to excuse the inexcusable.

Paul teaches that only God can justify the ungodly. The sinner cannot make himself right with God no matter how tight his alibi. God makes us right with himself. To do that he grants faith and something to hang that faith on—the promise of salvation by grace alone. Abraham had faith in God's promise that his offspring would outnumber the stars in the sky. Though he was already old and childless, he believed it. God reckoned his faith as something that made him right with God.

In our Old Testament lesson God promised Abram that through his offspring all the nations of the world would be blessed. Our Gospel identifies that offspring, born to Abram's distant descendant Mary but conceived in her by the Holy Spirit. God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, gave his life as a sacrifice to save the whole world. Those made right with God would be those who believe that when he is lifted up on the cross he will give eternal life. Only by faith are we made right with God, because faith humbly accepts that only God can make us right. It is his gift to us, not what we earn.

Faith is honest about sin, which results in confession, which leads to God's gift of righteousness. Jesus told of two men who went into the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, a faithful religious rule keeper. The other was a tax collector, who was every bit the sinner his public reputation said he was. If they had written their own eulogies in a way that reflected their prayers, the Pharisee would have written this: "He was not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. He fasted twice a week and gave tithes of all that he got." Certainly something to boast about, but not before God. The tax collector would have only written, "*God was merciful to me, a sinner!*"

If Jesus had preached their funerals, he would have ended the sermon about the tax collector with these words: "I tell you, this man went down to his death justified, rather than the other." (Actually, I believe He wouldn't have even shown up for the Pharisee's funeral, much less preached it.) The tax collector believed the truth about his sin and the promise of God to forgive. His faith was counted to him as righteousness.

On Good Friday, a criminal crucified next to Jesus called out, "*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!*" But the other rebuked him, saying, "*Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.*"

This other criminal knew he was getting the wage of his sin, death. Yet by faith in the promise of God's mercy, he pleaded the most outlandish request, having no reason except faith: "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" And Jesus' response to the criminal was just as remarkable: "*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*" The criminal had nothing to boast about before God. But by faith, he was made right with God.

Are you right with God? Do we have any more reason to expect paradise from God than did the criminal? Will the eulogy read at your funeral be the word about your good works, or the good work of Christ? Our Tuesday Bible study, by Ambassadors of Reconciliation, teaches that we cannot be reconciled to each other until we are reconciled to God. So I join Paul in saying, "*We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore*

you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” If you believe this, then you are right with God. Amen.