

Pentecost 2 / June 11, 2023

Romans 4:16

“That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed...”

Faith counted as righteousness for those who believe.

Do we live by law or by promise? In the letter to the Romans, St. Paul contrasts God's promise and the obligations of the law. The promise is God's grace, given as a gift to those who believe. The law is the terms by which people live in a relationship, legally entered into and defined by contract. The two are opposites, but they are not opposed to each other. Abraham entered into relationship with God through faith in His promise. Abraham believed and God counted it to him as righteousness. The relationship with given legal form when God made covenant with Abraham, and commanded the act of circumcision. The law came second. The promise was made first.

Two people can be friends. They are simply friends, their friendship is not defined or regulated by any legal stipulations, other than the expectations of honesty and respect, written on our hearts by the law of nature. They are friends and feel a natural affinity for one another. If at a certain time they decided to enter into a business arrangement, the terms of their relationship would be made more formal. Their relationship would be defined legally as a partnership and would carry certain obligations under law. They would be bound to these terms even if their friendship ended. Their business partnership would remain and they would continue to have legal obligations to each other, until their partnership was legally dissolved.

Do we live under law or by promise? It depends upon the type of relationship of which we are speaking. Friendships have an unwritten code, but there is no external law to regulate friendships. Married couples live in a relationship of promise under law. They enter into that relationship through promise. However, once entered into by promise under law, their relationship carries legal obligations which continue, even if the promises end. All relationships have an unwritten code, based on the moral law written on our hearts. Some relationships are embedded in law. God came first to Abraham as He does to us, as a friend. The promise comes first and is the spirit of our relationship with God. He considers us His friends on the basis of our faith in His promise in Christ Jesus. Our relationship with God is based on His grace received through faith in Christ.

We live with God by promise and law, but in their proper order. God called us to Himself by His word of promise, even as He called Abraham to Himself. God made Himself known to Abraham and created faith in His heart, through His word. By the working of the Holy Spirit, Abraham believed God and God counted him as righteous. God made Himself known to us through His word, spoken by our parents, grandparents, teachers, friends, in whatever way the Spirit enabled. Through the word and by the working of the Holy Spirit, God gave us faith to believe His promises, expressed fully in Christ Jesus. Faith is counted as righteousness for those who believe, because it receives the grace God promises. Faith is the heart's response to God's promise, through which He initiates a relationship with those who believe.

Abraham believed God's promise. God counted him righteous and entered into relationship with him. God entered into a legal relationship with Abraham and His descendants through the covenant. In both cases the promise was received through faith, sealed in covenant and certified in the sign of circumcision, which God commanded Abraham and his descendants to receive. The relationship that God initiated through the promise was given form and definition through the law of commandments, which included the moral, ceremonial and civil law of Israel. Obedience to the law was an expression of Israel's faith in the promise. Obedience was their pledge to live with God according to the promise. In the same way, the moral law informs the expression of our faith in God's promises in Christ Jesus.

God initiated relationship with us through the promise of His love in Christ Jesus. We entered into relationship with Him through faith in His promises of forgiveness and life in Christ. God formalized our relationship with Him through baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Baptism is our spiritual circumcision. Paul writes in Colossians, “In Him you also were circumcised in a circumcision made without hands...by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” God enters into relationship with us through faith when we receive Christ as our Saviour. God formally adopts us as children for the sake of Christ and guarantees His promises of forgiveness and life, in the washing of the water and the word. Baptism is the spiritual

circumcision of the covenant Jesus made between God and all peoples, in the sacrifice of His body and the shedding of His blood on the cross.

Circumcision was a physical sign and seal of God's promise to Abraham and the people of Israel. Circumcision commanded by law, marked Abraham and his descendants as children of promise. Baptism is the spiritual sign and seal of God's promise to all people in Christ. Those who receive it are marked by the Spirit as children of promise. Baptism is God's guarantee that He has adopted us as His children and given His Spirit to dwell within us. Baptism is God's assurance that He counts us as righteous in His sight for the sake of Christ Jesus. Baptism is God's pledge that He will continuously cover our sins in forgiveness, until He completely uproots sin from our nature in the resurrection of Christ Jesus. Faith receives the promises God makes in baptism, so they become effective in our lives in time and for eternity. So, faith is counted as righteousness for those who believe.

Ancient Israel's relationship with God began with a promise given to Abraham, received by faith. When God saw that Abraham believed Him, He counted his faith as righteousness. This relationship was formalized legally when God entered into covenant with Abraham and Abraham was circumcised. This relationship was extended to the offspring of Abraham and Sarah and to sojourners and servants who also joined themselves to the covenant through circumcision. In every case the relationship began with God's promise received by faith and later was defined by covenant and expressed by its legal terms. God and Israel made promises and bound themselves to those promises. Promise came first, law followed in response. The law gave form to the expression of Israel's faith.

Abraham and Israel's relationship with God was extended to all people with the coming of Jesus into the world. Jesus fulfilled the legal demands of the covenant of Mount Sinai and the demands the moral law makes of all human beings, through His perfect obedience and sinless life. He paid the debt of sin demanded of every human soul, through the sacrifice of His body on the cross and the shedding of His holy and innocent blood.

God promised to make Abraham into a mighty nation and give him descendants as numerous as the stars in the skies. God created the people of Israel from Abraham's descendants, through whom He also promised to bless all the nations of the earth. God blessed all people by giving His Son to be born a human being, the offspring of Abraham. Through Christ, God offers forgiveness and eternal life for all to receive. He gives freely and abundantly to all who believe. Faith is counted as righteousness for those who receive Christ into their hearts and believe in Him as Saviour. God open our hearts to receive and believe.

God who has begun the good work of faith in our hearts, bring it to completion in resurrection to life everlasting on the day of Jesus Christ. In His name. Amen