

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Lent 2

March 8, 2020

Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

***Resting on God's promises***

—Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

The book of Romans is the ultimate guide to free salvation by God's grace through simple trust in Jesus. We are not saved by our obedience. We are not saved by our good works. We are not saved by keeping the Commandments. We cannot be. It's impossible. Our own good works are filthy rags. Our own best efforts are nowhere near the absolute perfection God requires from us in obedience to his holy law. We have sinned, by our fault, by our own fault, by our own grievous fault. If we think we can get into God's good graces through our efforts or obedience or works, we will most certainly be cast away into outer darkness. Scripture says, "All who rely upon observing the law are under a curse, for cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law" (Galatians 3:10). By our own efforts we are hopeless, desperate, and destined for eternal fire; that is certain. Our only hope is in God's mercy. In his great love for us he had mercy upon us, took upon himself our human flesh, became our brother, was named Jesus, obeyed the law for us, and died on the cross as the sacrificial payment for our sins. Jesus, our Substitute and Savior, has done it all. Trust in him and receive the forgiveness of your sins. Believe in him and live forever.

In the first three chapters of Romans the Apostle Paul lays out so clearly and logically how Jesus has done it all for us, how we're saved eternally by God's grace through faith in Jesus. But now in chapter 4 Paul wants to press home another point: God's plan of salvation has *always* been this way! A restored relationship with God now and forever has *always* been a matter of simple trust; it has *never* been a matter of our obedience. To make his point Paul takes us back to Abraham. To Abraham? Yes, to Abraham, the father of the Jewish race, the patriarch of all believers. Abraham lived 4,000 years ago. How was Abraham saved? Was he saved by keeping the Commandments? No, the Commandments wouldn't be chiseled in stone for another 500 years after Abraham. Abraham was saved through simple trust, the same as we are. Paul quotes Genesis: "Abraham *believed* God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

We human beings do not naturally want things to be so simple. We want to offer God *something*, there must be *something* that we can do to make God pleased with us, to make him love us more. So every religion that strays from the truth, every religion that man invents to pull himself closer to God, always involves human beings contributing something to earn our way into heaven. Some religions have *karma*, what goes around comes around; you get what you deserve, good or bad, in this life and the next. Some religions have very carefully defined rules that you must follow to get to heaven. Some religions have rituals and processes that people need to undergo to be cleansed of sin and gain merit with God. Even people who claim to have no religion have a religion and point to their own goodness and virtue as reasons why they should live with God—if there is a god.

But the true Christian faith teaches us something completely counterintuitive. God owes us nothing, we can earn nothing, God rewards us and gives us something completely other than what we deserve, and instead of giving us death he gives us eternal life for Jesus' sake. Paul puts it this way: "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." When you work you get paid. Your employer has a contractual obligation to pay you as remuneration for your labor. What if you don't work? Then normally you don't get paid; you get fired. No more job! But what if your employer were to say, "You don't have to work, but I will pay you anyway." You say, "Do you want me to smile and look pretty or handsome and be the face of the company?" and your employer says, "No, you don't have to do anything. You don't have to show up for work. Just trust that every two weeks your paycheck will be deposited into your bank account." How would you like that? How would you respond? Would you say, "This is too good to be true, it has to be a scam, and go looking for compensation elsewhere?" Or would you say, "This is a really sweet gig! I really like my employer! He pays me and I don't have to do anything to earn it!"

How does God reward people? The world says, "God helps those who help themselves." But that's not what God says. God says, "I helped you before you ever could help yourself. I helped you when you were dead in sin, reveling in wickedness, shackled in bondage, when you were still my enemy." God says, "To the person who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." Our natural human response is, "God helps me and forgives me if I just . . ." and God says, "No, no, there is no *quid pro quo*." Our natural human response is, "But I have to . . ." and God says, "Nothing of the sort! There is no 'You have to.'" It's free. It's a gift. You are forgiven because Jesus did everything for you! God promised!

In the mind of anyone Jewish, Abraham is a very big deal. 4,000 years ago, God called Abraham to be the father of a special, chosen race. God told Abraham to go live as a foreigner and a stranger in the far-off land of Canaan. God promised Abraham's descendants would inherit the land. God promised that even though Abraham had no children at the time, his descendants would end up being as uncountable as the sand on the seashore. Most importantly, God promised Abraham that from his one special offspring, all nations would be blessed; God promised Abraham that the Savior of the world would descend from his family. Abraham is the father of the Jewish nation. Abraham was the first resident in what is now Israel. Abraham is huge for Jews, so much so that when people came out to listen to John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, John the Baptist called the people to repent of this crazy notion that they were good with God just because they were descended from Abraham—because that's what so many people thought. No repentance, no faith, just the right genealogy, and we're good. And right up there with Abraham is Moses. Moses delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. Moses brought the law of God down from Mt. Sinai. Moses led the people to the Promised Land.

Unfortunately by the time of Jesus, the people had corrupted the faith of Abraham and Moses to the point where they thought if you're descended from Abraham and obey the law of Moses, then you're close to God. The Pharisees were very proud of their obedience to Moses, and the people who couldn't be Pharisees because they knew they couldn't keep the laws of Moses—well, at least they were the children of Abraham. But this is the glorious gospel truth that Jesus and John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul all preached: You want to be part of Abraham's family? You come into the same family as Abraham, not when you have Abraham's DNA in your cells but when you trust in the same promise as Abraham. When you trust in God's promise of mercy and forgiveness in Abraham's descendant Jesus the Christ, then you have a place with Abraham because you have a place in God's family through Jesus. "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 are of the faith of Abraham." Grace trumps law! It always has, and it always will! God's promises of free forgiveness and righteousness overshadow anything that man can do.

So let's bring this home. You want to be right with God. You want to know that you're going to be in heaven when you die. You want to live your life in the absolute confidence of knowing where you stand with God, solidly in his forgiveness, certain of your eternal life. You want to know that in God's eyes you are a good person, righteous, justified, forgiven, sin-free. You want to live a life that has purpose and meaning right now, a life of fulfillment, a life of joy and peace, strength for living. You want to put God first and live for him, and you want to be kind and helpful to people around you. Trust God's promises to you. The offspring of Abraham is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment of the God's promises to Abraham that in his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Abraham's Seed, Jesus Christ, came to be the Savior of the entire human race. God so loved you that he gave his only Son for you. Trust God's promises in Jesus, and you will not perish. Trust God who justifies the wicked—who has justified you and called you righteous. Trust Jesus' perfect life and his holy death, hold to them in faith, and they are yours to cover you and to cleanse you.

Whenever you're troubled, worried, afraid, unsettled— Whenever the nations are in a panic because coronavirus is ravaging the world— Whenever your sins plague you or doubts nag at you— Whenever the time comes when you find yourself at death's door—rest in God's promises, the same promises that Abraham rested in, the same promises that Christians have rested in for millennia as they made their way through this life clinging to the Word of God. Your sins are forgiven! God's Spirit lives in your heart. Your life lived today for God and for your neighbor has purpose and fulfillment now. Heaven waits. God has promised, and we rest in his promises! Amen.