

Water for the Way: Part Two

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

1. Abraham.

2. Legalism.

3. Grace.

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com



West Valley Church
03/06/23
Michael O'Neill

Water for the Way Week Two¹

Years ago when Comedian Jay Leno was the host of the Tonight Show, he would sometimes go out on the streets and conduct "man-on-the-street" interviews. One time when he did that, he asked random people to name one of the Ten Commandments. The most common response was something that wasn't even on God's original list—"God helps those who help themselves." Many, many people think that phrase, which is often used to emphasize a get-your-act-together approach to salvation, is from the Bible. Maybe you did, too.

But the phrase comes from non-biblical sources. In a first century A.D. Greek fable, a wagon falls into a ravine, but when its driver prays to Hercules for help, Hercules tells him to get to work himself. One of Aesop's fables has a similar theme. When a man calls on the goddess Athena for help during a shipwreck, she tells him to try swimming first. Both of these stories were probably created to illustrate an already existing proverb about helping yourself first.

A French author from the 1600s once said, "Help yourself and Heaven will help you too." But it was the 17th century English thinker Algernon Sidney who has been credited with what we now know as the phrase, "God helps those who help themselves." Benjamin Franklin later used it in his *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1736), and it has been widely quoted ever since. There's even a passage with similar sentiments found in the Quran, Chapter 13:11: "Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves."

But that phrase *never* appears in the Bible, and the way it's often used (as a self-help approach to salvation) is the exact opposite of the Bible's message of salvation by God's grace.²

This is our second Sunday in the season of Lent, and we are going through the daily devotional book called "Water for the Way," using the resources that coincide with the book that was published by our church publishing house.

I want to read the Bible passage that we are looking at today, and that many of you have already read in your devotional book. Would you help me honor God's Word by standing with me as I read it?

Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What did he discover about being made right with God? If his good deeds had made him acceptable to God, he would have had something to boast about. But that was not God's way. For the Scriptures tell us, "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith."

¹ *Water for the Way* pastor's resource sermon outlines, The Foundry Publishing, 2022

² "God helps those who help themselves," Wikipedia

When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned. But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners.

Clearly, God's promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was based not on his obedience to God's law, but on a right relationship with God that comes by faith. If God's promise is only for those who obey the law, then faith is not necessary and the promise is pointless. For the law always brings punishment on those who try to obey it. (The only way to avoid breaking the law is to have no law to break!)

So the promise is received by faith. It is given as a free gift. And we are all certain to receive it, whether or not we live according to the law of Moses, if we have faith like Abraham's. For Abraham is the father of all who believe. That is what the Scriptures mean when God told him, "I have made you the father of many nations." This happened because Abraham believed in the God who brings the dead back to life and who creates new things out of nothing. (Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, nlt)

This is the Word of God for the people of God – thanks be to God! Thank you for standing; you can be seated.

Okay, buckle up because we're going to do some theology together today that will have major implications on how you understand God's relationship to you and your relationship to him; and I think you'll recognize that some of the types of thinking that we have today are just as faulty as what Paul was correcting here.

The author of our devotional book is Dr. Gabriel Benjiman, who is with the Church of the Nazarene in South Africa, and in fact he and I shared several classes together in our graduate studies.

In our devotional reflection for today the author shares a story about a woman who approached him at church and said she believed she became ill because she forgot to put her little green Bible under her pillow at night while she slept. We might find it easy to dismiss this behavior as silly or superstitious. We might even be tempted to moralize about how we cannot *earn* God's favor by what we do—but we should be careful to acknowledge the ways we also fall into this same trap.

We live in a transactional culture. We work harder or produce more in exchange for a higher salary, higher favor, better opportunities. For example, just look at what children are taught about Santa Claus. Children are told they must go to sleep, they must not cry, they must not pout, they must behave, in order to get presents from Santa. The way we teach children about Santa is a reflection of the general way we live our lives in the world.

The people in the early church in Rome were having a similar problem. They saw Abraham as someone who followed the law perfectly, who did the right things and avoided the wrong things, and they concluded that *that* was why he was blessed by God as the father of nations. But Paul corrects this thinking, saying that it wasn't about what Abraham *did*. The free gift of God's grace and mercy is what allowed the blessing on Abraham.

Paul's correction is important for us too because, just like with the culture of the world that says, "work harder, produce more—or else," we can begin to believe that God favors us

based on *what we do* instead of based on the free gift of grace that God extends to us. This is especially important in this season of Lent, when we put spiritual practices and disciplines in place. Maybe you practice this, or you've heard of this: people "giving up for lent"? It means that during lent, people will give something up; it could be sweets, or social media, or anything that is a sacrifice in order to remind themselves of Christ's sacrifice and suffering for them. Of course, as Christians, we do that during the forty days of lent, but there are also six Sundays during lent that we can break the fast. That's because we celebrate and feast on Sundays, the Lord's Day, resurrection day. Make sense? But, when we fast or engage in any kind of spiritual discipline, we can mistake these disciplines that can help form us and we begin to think that they are something to earn God's favor – instead of tools to help us connect more deeply with God. But from what we just read in Romans, there is *nothing* we can do to earn the grace of God. It's already available to all of us as a gift, if we only receive.

So let's learn what the Apostle Paul is trying to get the church in Rome to learn so that we can learn from it, too.

Let's start by looking at the subject, or the model, or the example that Paul is using to make his point, and that is the life of...

1. **Abraham**.

Paul points to Abraham in this passage because there was this prevailing belief that Abraham followed the law perfectly. The Church in Rome was made up of both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. In both cases, they saw Abraham as a model of perfect obedience to the law. For the Jews, Abraham was part of their history, and that was the primary thought in their Jewish faith. So even though they had been saved and brought into right relationship with God through Christ, they still clung to that idea of Abraham, and readily shared that thinking with their Gentile Christian counterparts. And it made sense to them, too, because Roman thinking was that you had to please the gods, that you had to succeed in life by achieving more, that you had to work hard and pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Sound familiar? The Roman dream sounds like the American dream. So when the Jewish Christians told them about their hero Abraham working hard to earn his righteousness, the Gentile Christians bought right into it, because this (they thought) was why he was the father of nations: his descendants received favor from God because of Abraham's blameless life.

For Paul's readers, Abraham was also considered the first Jew, because he is the starting point of the nation of Israel, as the father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, and thus all the descendants thereafter.

But that line of thinking from Paul's audience is flawed for a few reasons.

For one thing, and this is a big one: Abraham wasn't favored by God because he followed the law and here's why: the law didn't exist when God called Abraham! The law wasn't written until over three hundred years *after* Abraham's life and death. That's when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, and God gave them the Ten Commandments and the Law. It would have been impossible for Abraham to follow a system of laws that did not yet exist.

And don't forget another thing – Abraham himself was a Gentile when he was called—there were no Jews yet because Judaism didn't exist yet. So Abraham wasn't even a Jew in the first place. So just for those reasons alone, Abraham wasn't favored by God because of his Jewishness or his obedience to the law.

Then Paul reminds his readers and us that God justifies the ungodly. What this means is that God is sovereign and can bless whoever God chooses. If God wants to give unearned favor to a sinner, he can – He is God! He can do whatever he wants. More than that, the blessings are the *gift* of God, not the work of those who are blessed.

Scripture says that “Abraham *believed* God, and it was *credited* to him as righteousness.” The emphasis is not on what Abraham did but on his faith in God. Abraham was blessed and considered righteous because of his trust in God's love and God's character. Remember what we talked about last week with Adam and Eve? The decision for them was whether or not they were going to trust God's love. They chose not to.

When Paul is writing in this passage, he is using something called an “interlocutor” – Paul is writing as if he is in a conversation with someone else and he's answering their arguments. And the fictional interlocutor is representing the viewpoint of the people in the church in Rome who think Abraham earned his righteousness. So Paul continues the conversation. He knows that another rationale of his readers is that Abraham was not considered justified or righteous by God until *after* he was circumcised—which is something that all male Jews would do in obedience to the law. If you don't know what that means talk to your parents. Whatever you do don't look it up. But that was another viewpoint that Paul's readers had about Abraham. And Paul puts this assumption to rest as well. Circumcision was not the *way* to justification for Abraham; it showed that he *was* justified. It was only a sign, a seal, a symbol—a way to illustrate to others Abraham's righteousness before God. In other words, Abraham wasn't righteous *because* he was circumcised; Abraham was circumcised because he was righteous.

So then Paul begins to drill down toward the main point about God's grace: Paul emphasizes that righteousness isn't just for Jews who follow the law but that it is for Gentiles as well. Abraham, as the father of many nations (not just the nation of Israel), is not restricted to bloodlines. He is a father of faith to all who follow in his footsteps.

As Paul begins to clarify what God's grace is about, the contrast becomes more and more clear: there is a huge difference between God's grace and...

2. **Legalism.**

The idea of Abraham as a perfect follower of faith led to legalism—a rigid adherence to the law. This is what Jesus spoke so harshly against in his preaching and teaching and his demonstrations of God's love. This was so ingrained in the minds and culture of the Jews that the same idea was seeping into the early church; the idea that Christians also needed to follow every law of Torah perfectly. This also meant that Gentile Christians were not allowed to worship with Jewish Christians; Gentile Christians were being left out of worship or told that they needed to be circumcised to participate in worship. Paul talks about this same conflict in more detail in Galatians, proving that it isn't an isolated issue in

one congregation. In fact, Paul was so angry about these Jewish Christians treating Gentiles this way and telling them they have to be circumcised that he told the Church in Galatia that these “agitators” should just go a step further and castrate themselves! Yikes! How do you really feel about this, Paul? Paul hated legalism, and he was in good company, because so did Jesus himself.

Not to mention that many of the rules surrounding obedience to the law were only *interpretations* of the law. Especially in an oral tradition where people didn’t know how to read, it was up to religious leaders to interpret what laws meant for the people. This practice would have continued in the early Christian church. This opened the door for lots of abuses. Legalism was used to control people. Another reason why Christ deplored it.

Fixating on the law leads to legalism and a concern with perfectionism.

There are 613 individual laws that make up the Torah! These were further interpreted and spelled out in 63 different books that totaled nearly 6,000 pages. Following each one perfectly to the letter was impossible.

If salvation comes by following all 613 laws perfectly, then what is the point of faith? Faith is the *response* of a person toward a gracious God. It is the response to receiving the good gift of grace. God gives, we respond in faith and accept his gift.

If salvation comes by following all 613 laws perfectly, then *no one* can be saved. Everyone would be doomed, and the sacrifice of Christ would mean nothing.

So let’s step back for a second and self-evaluate. It is easy for us to judge these characters from the Bible who were fixated on works, but let’s be honest: we today often strive to earn favor with God.

I remember when I was the student pastor at College Church on the campus of Northwest Nazarene University. Most of the students at that time were from Nazarene churches, and I knew that they still struggled with this idea of earning God’s favor, even though they would say they were strongly against legalism. So I would ask them this question, and you might consider what your answer would be, too: I asked them, “How is your relationship with Christ doing right now?” Think about it. What would your answer be? I can tell you that in *every* case – and I asked this of scores of students – in *every* case, when I asked them “How is your relationship with Christ right now?” You know what they’d say? They always said, “It could be better.” So I’d say, “Why do you say that? In what ways could it be better?” They would say something like: “I could be reading my Bible more.” Or, “I could be praying more.” Or, “I could be telling other people about Jesus more than I do.” Did you say something like that? Here’s what I’d say in response: “Oh, so you’re telling me your relationship with Christ is based on something you do? Are you telling me that you believe in earning your salvation?” Of course, they’d say no. We’re no different than them; we think we could be better Christians if we did this, or did that...Now, I’m not saying those things aren’t important. But if we think God loves us less because we aren’t doing more, then we are legalists, too. There is **NOTHING** you do or don’t do that will make God love you less. Also, no amount of Bible reading and prayer can make God love you more. There is **NOTHING** you can do to make God love you more than he already does. Your relationship to Christ is because God loves you. Period. Now, your response in faith to his love is to do those other things.

While I'm being harsh about this, let me also say that we fall into this trap because often we judge those who don't follow the way we believe they should. We may not require circumcision, but there are other things we judge other Christians by who we think aren't measuring up.

Richard Foster is a Christian writer and speaker who specializes in practicing and writing about spiritual disciplines – the things we do in response to God's grace, like Bible reading and prayer and fasting. He wrote this about our tendency toward judging others legalistically:

"Nothing can choke the heart and soul out of walking with God like legalism. Rigidity is the most certain sign that the Disciplines have spoiled. The disciplined person is the person who can live appropriately in life.

Consider the story of Hans the tailor. Because of his reputation, an influential entrepreneur visiting the city ordered a tailor-made suit. But when he came to pick up his suit, the customer found that one sleeve twisted that way and the other this way; one shoulder bulged out and the other caved in. He pulled and struggled and finally, wrenched and contorted, he managed to make his body fit. As he returned home on the bus, another passenger noticed his odd appearance and asked if Hans the tailor had made the suit. Receiving an affirmative reply, the man remarked, "Amazing! I knew that Hans was a good tailor, but I had no idea he could make a suit fit so perfectly for someone as deformed as you." Foster goes on to say, "Often that is just what we do in the church. We get some idea of what the Christian faith should look like: then we push and shove people into the most grotesque configurations until they fit wonderfully! That is death. It is a wooden legalism which destroys the soul."³

We do the same thing to ourselves; we judge ourselves harshly when we fail, continually living in shame cycles instead of trusting that God's grace is enough. So we create our own legalistic standards and then we don't forgive ourselves when we don't live up to them. That's what those "good Nazarene" college students were doing. That's what we do.

Folks, it's ALL about...

3. Grace.

When we put our faith in Jesus, he transforms our lives. That transformation is a sign and seal of a person's faith, not a precursor to it. Transformation by grace can be compared to Abraham's circumcision, which was an act that illustrated his faith, not one that earned him favor with God.

The entire message of Jesus is one of grace as a gift. Christ didn't come to us out of obligation, but out of love—the incarnation itself is a declaration of God's love. That word "incarnation" refers to God coming to us in the real person of Jesus Christ. That alone is a declaration of God's love. And then he suffered and died for us.

Christ's sacrifice was for us in the midst of our sin. He comes to you right now, in all your sin and imperfection. Christ didn't wait for us to follow the law perfectly; he came in spite

³ Richard J. Foster in *"TSF Bulletin,"* Nov.-Dec. 1982. Leadership, Vol. 4, no. 2.

of our imperfection. Christ isn't waiting for you to get your act together. He's coming to you right now.

Christ is not a cosmic Santa waiting for us to misbehave but a generous giver who extends grace to all of us. The only action that needs to happen on our part is to receive the gift. Faith is our response to a good God who gives good gifts. God loves you right now, just the way you are, and not the way you think you should be. *(repeat)*

The incarnation and the grace given to us in Christ are good news for those of us who aren't part of the genetic lineage of Abraham. Grace is extended to everyone! A new family is being formed through grace—a family that does not depend on lineage or heritage. We are descendants of Abraham not by genetics or legalism but by faith in God's grace.

This gift of grace is also very good news for people who are new to the faith. Righteousness *begins* with grace and with the response of faith to that grace. *The moment of faith* is when we are credited as righteous—not by the works we do. If you are considering becoming a Christian or recently have, this is great news for you!

Even those who have grown up in faith communities can fall into the trap of thinking they need to earn God's favor. Some of us who look put together on the outside struggle internally with these cycles of shame about our inadequacy—but grace is always a gift. I think most of us struggle with the Imposter Syndrome with our faith. Are you familiar with that? Impostor syndrome is a psychological occurrence in which an individual doubts their skills, talents, or accomplishments and has a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud.⁴

They're afraid that if people saw what they're really like, they'd realize they're phony. I think a lot of Christians walk around with this internal thinking that says, "I'm not good enough," and so they put up a front as if they've got it all together.

Brennan Manning is one of my favorite authors and speakers who has passed away, but he continues to be a spiritual mentor to me, and he used to say something about this. Whenever he was talking to Christians and they'd say, "I should pray more," or "I should do more of whatever," he would say, "Don't should on yourself." (repeat slowly). He even had a sign on his desk that said, "Today I will not should on myself." You are saved by the sheer, extravagant, unreasonable love of God toward you. That's called grace. There's nothing you should or should not do to earn it.

Sometimes we even view the season of Lent—the season of fasting and repentance—as something we observe so God will love us more, instead of viewing it as an opportunity to grow in a deeper faith and understanding of that grace. People often fast during this time – they give up something for Lent. It could be desserts, or TV or social media, or any number of things. They do it to remind themselves that Christ suffered for them, and to use that time or that trigger to focus more intently on Christ. Of course, like I said earlier, if you are fasting for lent, you can break your fast every Sunday, because Sunday is a celebration day;

⁴ Langford, Joe; Clance, Pauline Rose (Fall 1993). "The impostor phenomenon: recent research findings regarding dynamics, personality and family patterns and their implications for treatment" (PDF). *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*. **30** (3): 495–501. doi:10.1037/0033-3204.30.3.495. Studies of college students (Harvey, 1981; Bussotti, 1990; Langford, 1990), college professors (Topping, 1983), and successful professionals (Dingman, 1987) have all failed, however, to reveal any sex differences in impostor feelings, suggesting that males in these populations are just as likely as females to have low expectations of success and to make attributions to non-ability related factors.

it is the day of celebration. So you fast six days and feast the seventh. So if you gave up chocolate for lent, as soon as church is over walk out these doors and go across the street to the store and buy up all the chocolate. You can eat chocolate all day today. But we don't give up things for lent as if God will like us more because of it. It's not about earning favor; it's about meditating on the goodness of grace.

It's important for us to remember the goodness of God and the immense gift that grace is. For those of us who are stuck in a shame cycle of not feeling good enough, it's important to breathe in the knowledge that God loves us and *has* loved us, and that God's grace is sufficient. It's important for those of us who grew up in destructive systems of legalism to release those systems in light of the grace given to all of us. God's grace is sufficient for all of us! It's sufficient for the world too. God continues to extend grace to all. All any of us have to do to receive this gift is accept it. Remember what Jesus said? In John 3:16-17 –

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”
(John 3:16-17, niv)

God continues to extend grace to all. All any of us have to do to receive this gift is accept it.

Prayer

Benediction: (Ephesians 6:23-24; 2 Corinthians 13:14)

Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.