

CJ's City Sunday Service 25 June 2006

Last week John said that CJ's would not be wise to advertise the fellowship here as described in Romans 3:13-14:

*"Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit."*

"The poison of vipers is on their lips."

"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

If the Bible says we are like this, what is the remedy?

How could our righteousness ever measure up to God's standards?

One of the basic concepts of a Christian life is justification by faith -- faith in the death of Jesus Christ: not faith in his life, but faith in his death. The alphabet of Christianity begins with the letter A -- Atonement. Atonement takes place at the foot of the cross -- the place where God and man meet.

One of the best ways to communicate truth is by illustrating it. We all know that a picture can be worth a thousand words. Here is a typical exhibit that may be shown in a court case.

The authors of Scripture were very much aware of the power of illustration. In Romans chapter 4, Paul begins to illustrate how we can be justified by faith. The best illustration for our justification is a living person. Paul uses Abraham as the illustration of what he means by being justified by faith.

Abraham is what we might call "Exhibit A" -- the first and primary piece of evidence -- when it comes to justification by faith. There are four points to Paul's illustration of Abraham here -- four things that Abraham's life teaches us about justification by faith: The first of them is the fact of faith. That is, the fact that justification is by faith, and no other way. Chapter 3 of Romans starting from Verse 27 says:

Romans 3:27-31:

²⁷Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. ²⁹Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

Romans 4:1-8:

¹What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? ²If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. ³What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ⁴Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

The key to this part of the illustration is Verse 28 of Chapter 3. Paul says, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law," and then he says that Abraham is a perfect illustration of that fact.

You may ask: "How did Abraham obtain such a high position of privilege and favour with God?" Admittedly, Abraham is one of the great religious names of all time. His name is honored by three of the great religions of the earth: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. They all hold him in the highest regard. And, in God's sight Abraham is set placed in a tremendous position of favour -- given the title, "God's Friend" (James 2:23).

Now, how did Abraham get there? Was it by a lifetime of good works and trying to please God? Paul's answer is: "No, of course not. For if that were the case, God would owe Abraham righteousness as his just due, and Abraham could boast in the fact that he had done enough good works to gain something from God." Paul says that you can never achieve righteousness by working in that way -- righteousness does not come that way. He quotes the Scriptures that tell us how Abraham gained such a place of favour in God's sight: "Abraham," we are told in Genesis 15:6, "believed God". That's all. God had promised Abraham something. Abraham simply believed, and, when he believed, he obtained the righteousness that he sought. This demonstrates that true righteousness is obtained only by believing. Nothing more complex than simply believing God.

The terrorists who crashed the passenger planes into the World Trade Center towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington believed. They believed that by their actions they would get to paradise.

The word "believe" is often misused. Abraham made room for God in his life. Now that is what believing is: Abraham practiced God. He didn't suddenly or even gradually become righteous and then go around looking for God. He simply, in his sin and failure, made room for God and God made him righteous.

The only way that men can ever become righteous before God is by making room for God in their busy schedules. And, when men do this, when they let God into their daily lives, and believe God enough to make room for him, then God begins to take over and make the life righteous. That is what happened to Abraham. Abraham believed God, he made room for Him.

He began to talk to God, He began to walk with him, He began to listen to him, He began to pay attention to him, and the minute he did, God credited him with righteousness, and began to make it real in his experience.

In Verse 7 and 8 of Romans 4 -- a quote from Psalm 32 -- David is called in as a witness -- a confirming witness to the same thing. Abraham was the great father of Israel, and David was its greatest king. Here are two of the greatest names in all of Israel testifying to the fact that nobody is made righteous before God by good works, but, rather, by believing what God says. David says:

..in Psalm 32:1-2:

⁷"Blessed are they
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

⁸Blessed is the man
whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

David uttered these words at a time when he had just murdered a man -- Uriah, the Hittite -- as a consequence of the adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. David had fallen into moral iniquity, and at the time that he committed this double sin of murder and adultery. However, David did not try to harden himself or run away from it all. Instead, he made room for God, and came to Him, and put the whole dirty mess before God, and asked to be forgiven. He wrote these words: "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed (or happy) is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

Is this blessing conferred only upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? We say that faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it credited to him? Was it credited to him before or after he was circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. (Romans 4:10)

The Jews thought that circumcision was what made a man acceptable to God, just as today many people think that baptism, good works or some other physical activity is what makes a man acceptable.

There are millions of people today who think that the thing that makes them acceptable to God is something other than faith.

But Paul points out that Abraham was declared righteous years before he was circumcised, and that circumcision was only a sign of righteousness which he had already by faith. This is simply saying that it is not only necessary to make room for God in your life, but it is necessary to make room for God first! This is what makes blessing from God possible, and everything else follows from it. Putting it another way, God must be the most important and the most evident fact of your life.

Think of what Noah saw when he came out of the Ark after the flood on top of Mount Ararat. He will have witnessed destruction akin to a nuclear holocaust -- the passengers of the Ark were the only survivors. The first thing that Noah did was to build an altar and give thanks to God. These are conditions in which life is at stake. There was nothing but mud, and chaos, and debris everywhere around.

What would you and I do if we faced those conditions? Wouldn't we say: "Let's find a place where there is some dry ground and see if we can get a little shelter set up. Let's see if we can find some dry wood, and get a fire going, and get dinner." Maybe, after we had taken care of our need for food and shelter, then we'd say, "Let's give thanks to God." The remarkable thing is that Noah knelt down in the mud, with all his family, and the first thing they did was to give thanks to God. That is why Noah was saved -- because he made room for God as the most important thing in his life.

Why is it that we think that we have to do everything ourselves in our lives? Isn't it because we have forgotten that God is the first and most important fact in human life.

We have to get an education first, we have to make our living, we have to educate our children, we have to see the world, and then, as we come to the end of our lives, then it is time for faith, then it is time to discover God. Jesus hinted at the correct order of priority in Matthew 6:33, "...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" and then "and all these things" you are struggling after "will be given to you as well".

The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:13)

Paul says about Abraham:

...as it written, "I have made you the father of many nations" -- in the presence of God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him doubt the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:17-21)

Although Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah's womb was barren, he believed God's promise to give him a son.

<<PPT Slide 10 – Hebrews 11:1>>

Hebrews 11:1 says: "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see". Faith is confidence that we will obtain what we hope for, based upon an understanding that there are things unseen that will bring these things to pass.

If we believe in God, we must believe that he is the God who can do the impossible. And, as we read here, he is the God who calls into existence the things that do not exist, who gives life to the dead.

Faith is the confidence that things you hope to be yours will come, despite all the present difficulties, and contrary to all the immediate evidence. That is what Abraham experienced. As he went along, nothing seemed to be happening: no child came into their family, His own body grew older and older, weaker and weaker, and Sarah's womb remained barren. But Abraham wasn't concentrating his efforts at worrying about these things. He was looking to his God who calls life out of death, and calls into existence the things that do not yet have existence. Because he had confidence in that kind of God, the promises made to him were fulfilled.

Abraham is the great example that, when a man stands upon what God says, all that God promises will be fully paid out to that man. That is what faith is: Abraham is Exhibit A.