

Is Goodness Enough to Guarantee Heaven?

October 4, 2009 - Romans 4:1-25

I need your help to begin today. I am going to list 5 people. I'll tell you a little about them. After I describe them, I'm going to ask for your opinion on whether or not you think they'll be in heaven.

Person #1. She was a nun who started a home for the destitute and dying on the streets of Calcutta, India. She ministered to the lowest of the low. Mother Teresa.

Person #2. Next we have a boy who grew up to be leader of the Nazi party in Germany. Eventually, he became chancellor of Germany from 1933-45. He initiated war and sanctioned the extermination of millions in Concentration camps. Adolf Hitler

Person #3. She's a TV talk show host who does benevolent work throughout the United States and in the world. Started O magazine. Oprah Winfrey.

Person #4. He is the first African American president of the United States. He campaigned last fall with words like "Hope" and "Yes we can." President Barak Obama.

Person #5. #83 – He's one of that hockey clubs most skilled players. Ales Hemsky of the Edmonton Oilers

By your applause let's hear what you think. How many think Mother Teresa will be in heaven? Adolf Hitler? Oprah Winfrey? Barack Obama? Ales Hemsky?

You probably used a variety of factors to come to a conclusion. One factor we likely considered was what they did do during their lifetime. The more good they did, the more we applauded thinking it more likely that they might be in heaven.

But how does God decide who gets into heaven and who doesn't? Do the good works of people factor into His decision.

Today, we get to consider this by looking at one of the most famous characters in the Bible. He was both hero and forefather to the Jewish people. Eleven chapters of the Old Testament book Genesis detail his life and relationship with God. The Bible tells us he was justified – that means he had right standing with God. He would make it into heaven. But on what basis did God make that decision?

Who does God justify? To answer that question, we are first going to take a brief look at this person's life. Then we're going to look at what Paul the author of Romans says about this person's life and justification. There we will find 2 very surprising answers to the

question, who does God justify? Finally, we will think about some ways to respond to the answers this text reveals to us.

Now let's find out a little about this character. He is one of the towering figures in the Old Testament. He trusted God's call to leave his home and go to a land that God would reveal to Him. (Genesis 12:1-8) He trusted God to provide for him, even after he let his nephew Lot have the best land. (Genesis 13). He rescues his nephew Lot from raiders and receives a blessing from one of God's priests in Salem. (Genesis 14). Now this man was married. But he had no children of his own. God promised that he would become the father of many and a light to the nations. In fact, God said this man's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. There would be millions of descendants. Even though he didn't have a child, he believed God's promise.

Later on God made a covenant with this man. God appeared to him as a smoking firepot. The firepot passed through the middle of some dead animal carcasses that this man had prepared. In doing that, God was saying, "if I don't keep my covenant with you, may I become

like these carcasses". So God really invested a lot in this guy. But the man still had no child of his own through his wife.

Later on God visited him with a couple of angels. God reassured this man that he would have a child through his wife within the year even though this man was 99 and his wife was 90! During this conversation, God entrusted this man with the knowledge of what would happen to Sodom and Gomorrah. (Genesis 18)

This man had to wait 25 years from the time he left his homeland to the delivery of his son through his wife. Finally, the promised heir named Isaac came along. But then God commanded the man to sacrifice Isaac. Yet this man trusted that God would be able to raise Isaac from the dead. (Genesis 22) In the end, God stopped this man from going through with the sacrifice. God provided a ram instead. And God kept his promise. Isaac became the father of Jacob. Jacob became father of 12 sons who became the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel. Israel became a nation. Jesus came out of that nation to be savior over many. So today, there are millions of spiritual descendants of this man.

He has a pretty impressive list of accomplishments. Some of you now know his name is Abraham. Surely, he would qualify to be justified by God based on all that. Let's examine what Paul says about this in Romans 3:27-4:8.

Romans 3:27-4:8

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.

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." (Genesis 15:6)

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. ⁶David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

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." (Psalm 32:1-2)

Who does God justify?

Paul has spent a fair amount of text deconstructing any confidence Jewish and Gentile readers had in themselves to earn right standing before God. Last week, we saw Paul answer the question, "How can a Holy God justly forgive" from Romans 3:21-26. He can justify us through faith because God put Jesus forward as a propitiation – a sacrifice that bore God's wrath to the end - on the cross.

Then in Romans 3:27, Paul continues by declaring no one can boast about their own ability to earn right standing before God. In Romans 3:28, he restates his main point. "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."

But starting in chapter 4, Paul deals with an imaginary Jewish objector who might argue like this: "I agree with you Paul that Gentiles are justified by faith. After all, what else have they got? But we're part of the chosen people of God. We have God's law. Yes we need faith in God. But our works play a huge part in our justification. It's both faith and works. You have to look no farther than our father Abraham for proof."

Paul answers this imaginary objector with Romans 4. He begins in verse 1 by saying “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?” In other words, “let’s consider Abraham’s life to see if he was justified by works.”

Verse 2 – “If in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God.” Or put another way: “For if we say he was justified by works, he has reason to boast, and I’m wrong in my claim in 3:27-28 that we can’t boast in our good works.” The Jewish interpretation of Abraham at that time, stressed his works as the most important aspect of his walk with God. Many believed that these works formed the foundation for his extraordinary and excellent relationship with God.

But Paul gives away his conclusion on this in the last four words of verse 2. “But not before God.” He completely rejects the argument that Abraham could boast in his works before God. But how can Paul make this conclusion? The next verses lay out his argument.

Verse 3 – “What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Paul quotes Genesis

15:6, the first verse in the Bible that mentions the word believe. In a rare occurrence for the Old Testament, belief is connected with righteousness or right standing before God. So even in the Old Testament we find that God justifies through faith *not works!* Abraham believed and it was credited or counted as righteousness.

The objector might still say “of course there was belief. But there were still works. Those works counted for something in his justification. But then comes Verse 4. “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.” When you go to work and collect your pay check, you might thank your employer for the check. But you don’t view it as a gift. You earned that. Your employer owes you that money.

If justification is by works, God owes us justification if we do enough good works. He would be obligated to pay for all we’ve done for him. This conclusion would be very appealing, living in our culture. Because we work. And we reward good works from a very young age. In kindergarten, if you sit up straight, you get a star. At school, if you earn good grades, you go on the honor roll. In sports, if you work hard, you get a trophy. In business, if you work hard, you

get a bonus. We don't give prizes to people who barely work. . What you get, you are owed.

Do you see how we can transfer this over to God? "God, I'm doing good works for you. Now you owe me!" But it doesn't work that way with God. Paul explains that in verse 5. "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

So here's the first answer to the question. *Who does God justify? Not those who trust their good works but those who trust Christ.* Now please don't misquote me or Paul here. He's not saying that we should all quit our jobs and enjoy God's blessings. He's saying we must stop trusting our good works to save us.

I don't believe Paul writes this to score theological points in a debate. I think he's writing this out of deep concern. He used to believe good works led to justification. He used to live like that, convinced that his good works justified him. So God intervened. Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus to reveal Paul had it all wrong. He was lost. So Paul looked away from his good works and

looked toward Christ. Paul cares deeply about his fellow Jew in Rome who based their right standing with God on human effort.

It is not by works that one is justified. If we don't see that, we'll spend our lives working to earn favor with God. We might even convince ourselves that we've crossed the line. We've done enough good works. And then we will have an attitude that God owes us.

Now this does not mean that good works are unimportant. In fact, good works can prove our salvation. They are part of the ongoing Christian life. But they play no part in the initial coming to Christ. Paul will address some of this later in the letter.

We discover the second answer to the question "Who does God justify?" also Romans 4:5. Listen to it again and see if you can catch it. "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."

So who else does God justify in this verse? What category of people is singled out as justified in this verse? Baptists? No, were not mentioned. Lutherans. No. CRC people. No. Pentecostals. No. Sunday School attendees. No. Good people. No. The wicked! The ungodly!

So who does God justify? *Not those who trust their good moral living but those who trust Christ.* Oh, what a devastating verse for anyone convinced that their good moral living earns them right standing with God. What a glorious verse for someone convinced they're too far gone for God to save them. If we think our moral goodness justifies us with God, we're lost. We'll trust in our moral goodness. But remember Romans 2 and 3? Every moral person apart from Christ is under sin. We can't do enough moral things to make God justify us. But we'll think it is possible. And then instead of looking *out* to others in prayer, ministry and the Jericho Road focus, we'll look down on them.

Every person declared righteous by God throughout history including Abraham did *nothing* but believe God and His promises. It's a good thing God didn't justify Abraham based on his good works. There is more to his story.

Along with all his "good works" Abraham stumbled. Instead of trusting God to protect them in Egypt, he lied to the Pharaoh about his wife, calling her his sister. (Genesis 12:10-20). Instead of waiting for God to provide the heir through Sarah, he agreed to Sarah's idea to

produce an heir through a maid-servant. (Genesis 16) He fell on his face and laughed when God revealed he would have a son through his wife Sarah. Instead of trusting God, he repeats the same faithless act of lying about his relationship with Sarah in a later chapter. (Genesis 20). So it's a good thing that God didn't look to Abraham's works for justification. We are, like him, only justified by faith.

How might we respond to this?

Examine if we trust our own good works for acceptance before God. You can test this by: Imagine you die tonight. You stand before God. He asks you, "Why should I let you into heaven?" If any part of your answer is "well I helped that person; I did that good deed, I attended church twice a month; I did 5 hours of volunteer work a week. All those things are very important. They can even be part of our living out our faith. But the only answer that allows entrance into heaven is "Because I put my trust in Christ. Because of His sacrifice, You, O God, justified me. So the claim on my life is covered. My sins are covered." The Lord will usher you in.

Guard against a deep-seated and permanent attitude of mistrust towards God. We may falter in trust but not have a

permanent mistrust. Do you ever find your faith in God weak? Do you ever find yourself doubting if God will really come through? If we doubt, does that mean we've got to find some sort of inner positive strength to kick out those doubts to ensure we're saved?

We might conclude that Abraham never doubted. In fact in Romans 4:19-21, Paul describes Abraham with phrases like "without weakening in his faith; he did not waver through unbelief; He was strengthened in his faith; he was fully persuaded." So we get this picture that Abraham had this super strong faith and never wavered and never doubted for an instant. But that can't be. We have already seen he stumbled. He doubted God's ability to protect while they were in Egypt. He did the same thing with the maid servant solution for an heir.

So how could Paul say "he did no waver through unbelief. Commentator Doug Moo puts it this way. "When Paul says Abraham did not "doubt . . . because of unbelief," he means not that Abraham never had momentary hesitations. But he avoided a deep-seated and permanent attitude and inconsistency in relationship to God and His promises." Paul is not denying the presence of some degree of doubt

in Abraham's faith (for, after all, he was a sinful human being), but is focusing on the heart attitude of Abraham toward God's promise. (285).

So yes we struggle at times with doubts. During those times we must feed our faith with His word and through prayer and in fellowship with other believers. But we must guard against a deep-seated mistrust of God. This is especially true in times of tragedy, difficulty and illness. We wonder "has God abandoned us? Why is this happening? Maybe He is not the great God I thought?"

You may know people today who remain angry towards God. They're convinced God failed them. I've heard stories from some of you who were mad at God for years because of some event/tragedy/struggle. Maybe that even describes you today. You don't know why you're here. But God arranged for you to be here. So He calls you to turn away from that mistrust of Him and turn to Him you can ultimately trust. If you need help to talk through that, contact one of the pastors.

Check any "you owe me God" attitude by pondering "Am I rejoicing in the gift of my salvation?" Do we think God owes us

big time? Any sort of “you owe me God” attitude is a warning sign. It might mean we’ve actually never been saved. It might mean we have trusted in our own works to save us instead of trusting Him. Or it might mean that we have let resentment and bitterness take over our hearts because something didn’t turn out like we wanted it to. We can test this attitude by asking “Am I rejoicing over the gift of my salvation?”

But now let’s look at some positive responses. **Trust in Christ for the first time.**

Maybe God has revealed to you today that you’ve been trusting in good works or good morals for right standing before him. Or maybe you were convinced God only justifies people who do good works. You’re too wicked for Him to justify you. It doesn’t depend on you. It depends on what He’s done. Jesus invites you to come to Him and to receive the gift of His payment for your sin debts.

It would be like someone coming here today to make an offer to everyone here. “I will pay all of your financial debts. All you have to do is bring your debts down to the bank. So if you take your debts

down to the bank, I have enough to cover you. Would you take them up on their offer?”

You have to admit all your bills. Yes, he’ll pay your mortgage. Oh and he’ll pay for that expensive shopping trip that you took where you got things you didn’t really need. Any gambling bills? How about drug bills? What about credit card bills to those questionable websites.” We might think “I’ll bring some of my debts. But not all. I’ll look after those.”

But he won’t let you do that. You have to bring all. When you bring them all, a transaction will occur in the bank. In the back room, they transfer the funds to your account. You’ll walk out with all your debts paid. On top of that, he’ll give you a hundred thousand dollars to live on. That’s kind of what the gospel is like. We bring our trust in Christ and our debts to God. We walk away with our debts paid and eternal resources to live on. But it only happens through faith.

Christian, continue to trust Him and rejoice in the blessing of salvation.

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."