

Ruling Out the Law

Father Abraham – Part V

Romans 4:13-16

Introduction

I read about an event that occurred in New York City several years ago; in fact, nearly sixty years ago. A man went into the Chase National Bank in New York in order to get a loan from their small loans department. He filled out all the papers and forms and took them to the teller at the window. The teller asked him to wait and then, disappeared for nearly ten minutes.

The man was beginning to grow impatient when, the president of the bank walked through the door, introduced himself, and asked if he could have a picture taken with this bank customer. Soon, cameras, news teams, and staff were, with great excitement, crowding around this unsuspecting man. Reporters for the newspapers were there and the amazed customer discovered that his loan was going to be rather unusual.

The day before, the bank records had indicated that at some time on the following day, the total loans made by the small loans department would reach the sum of one billion dollars. The bank trustees and board members decided to make this a publicity event and agreed to give, as a gift, the amount of any loan requested by the customer who happened to apply at the moment when this billion dollar figure was reached. This man was the fortunate customer. He had filled out all the papers to borrow the sum of six hundred dollars, but instead, before the news cameras, he was given six hundred dollars.

The bank, in effect, chose to reverse the laws of lending and make this fortunate man the recipient of a gift. He had not earned it; he might not have even

deserved it, but he got it. Chase National Bank representatives said to that man, “We’ll take your debt and place it on our account and handle it from our vast resources. You’ll never have to pay anything in return.”ⁱ

The gift of money did not have any “strings” attached. He did not have to promise to continue banking with them, although I am sure he would become a loyal, life-long customer; he did not have to promise to be nice to the president of the bank, although I am convinced he had a copy of the picture of the two of them tacked on a wall; he did not have to promise to bring more clients to do their banking with that bank, although I am certain he told everyone that there was not a better bank anywhere. No, he did not have to do anything; he just had to receive, from the vast billion dollar resources of Chase National Bank, his gift of six hundred dollars.

For some time now, we have been watching and listening, like curious customers and newspaper reporters, as the apostle Paul defends, defines, and illustrates the free gift of salvation. We have seen Abraham, in effect, step up to the counter of heaven’s depository and discover that he is being offered the gift of eternal life. All he has to do is receive the gift, with no “strings” attached; no promises to make; no guarantees demanded. Is it any wonder that, to this day, God’s grace still catches people off guard?!

I want to remind you, however, that Abraham was not being given a measly six hundred dollars; he was being offered everlasting life and the inheritance of the universe! How in the world do you get something like that for free? Surely it is not really free?! How do you win a free gift like that?!

If you are like me, you cannot even win a free coke at McDonald's during their big give-away! You get that little cardboard game piece and scratch all the gray ink off of all the little circles to reveal the prize underneath, and every one of them say, "Sorry, play again."

My father-in-law is the only person I know who ever won anything worth talking about. He and my mother-in-law were driving from Atlanta to visit my wife and I in Detroit, where we spent a few years in seminary. They stopped at a McDonald's in a little town on the way and he actually won a free Atari game system. Are old enough to know what an Atari was? He also won a free game with it. He became unbeatable in Pac Man; he was unstoppable! Our vacations would never be the same! When he won that day, even the McDonald's staff got excited. One of them told my father-in-law, "I've never seen anyone win anything here before!"

How One Does *Not* Receive the Free Gift of Eternal Life

Now, it is not too much of a stretch of the imagination to think of someone winning a free Atari, or a free coke, but not eternal life! How do you receive a gift like that?

Paul has spent the majority of Romans, chapter 4, explaining how you cannot receive the grace of God. He will expose three different ways that do not gain the gift of eternal life.

Through the completion of righteous deeds

1. First, through the completion of righteous deeds (verses 1 through 8).

He writes, in Romans, chapter 4, verse 2,

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

By conformity to religious rituals

2. Secondly, by conformity to religious rituals (verses 9 through 12).

This includes rituals such as, baptism, circumcision, and church membership.

In the middle part of verse 11, Paul clearly states that,

[Abraham is] the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that

righteousness might be credited [or reckoned] to them

By complying with religious rules and regulations

3. Paul will then expose the third error that we will discuss today; which is, the delusion of believing you can gain heaven by complying with religious rules and regulations (verses 13 through 16).

Paul will remove the last spiritual prop that people around the world naturally lean on in hopes of gaining the promise of eternal life.

One Does *Not* Receive Eternal Life By Keeping Rules

That prop is the belief that you get into heaven by keeping the right rules. Paul writes in Romans, chapter 4, verse 13,

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.

The key phrase is the found in the words, "not through the Law". The article, "the," in "the Law," is absent in the Greek text; thus Paul is speaking of law in general terms. This is not just the Old Testament Law; not just the Ten Commandments, but law in any land that corresponds to the character of God. This was important for the Gentile readers, since they might not consider themselves accountable to the Jewish Law.

Even without a copy of the law, everyone will consider themselves a "keeper of some sort of law" in one way or another. If you ask anyone on the street, "Do you keep the law perfectly?" you will get the same answer every time, "Most of the time, I do."

No, I asked, "Do you keep the law perfectly?"

They will hedge a bit and shuffle their feet, but, eventually, say, "Okay, I've broken a few rules here and there."

They are not thinking about *the* Law, they are thinking about law in general; some of their own rules for living. In other words, the very people who believe they will get into heaven by keeping the rules, have to admit that, somewhere along the way, they have broken some of them!

The good news is delivered by Paul in verse 13. Abraham, and everyone else, has been given the inheritance of the world (which is the Greek word,

“kosmos,” meaning, “cosmos, the universe”), not by keeping the Law, but through, as he says in the text,

... the righteousness of faith.

That is, the righteousness that is imputed to the account of a sinner who places their faith in God’s redemptive plan and person, Jesus Christ.

The Law – Two reasons it will not give eternal life

Paul goes on to say, “If you’re going to get into heaven by keeping the rules, then you need to know two very important things.”

Trusting in the Law means you are refusing the free gift

1. Number one, trusting in the Law means you are refusing the free gift.

Notice verse 14.

For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified

In other words, if God promises the inheritance to those apart from the works of the Law, yet it is given only to those who keep the Law, then the promise of free salvation is null and void.

Even my father-in-law’s free Atari was not absolutely free. He had to buy his meal at McDonald’s in order to get a chance to play the game.

Let us say that I told everyone at church to come, after the service, to where I had parked my pick-up truck, so that I could pick someone to give my truck to as a free gift. If I picked you, out of the thousands who would come for such an offer, it would be yours for free. I would hand my keys to you, but, let us say that, as you reached for them, I pulled them back and said, “Hey, are you a member of this church?”

“No.”

“Have you been baptized?”

“No.”

“Are you supporting the needs of this ministry with your financial gifts?”

“No.”

“Are you involved in some ministry service here at the church?”

“No.”

Would I give you my truck? Well, if I said, “Listen, if you want my free truck, you have to do all

those things,” would it be free? No. My requirements of religious exercises would nullify the promise of a free gift.

That is what Paul means in this verse. This is incredibly significant news. You cannot receive the free gift of salvation and, at the same time, try to pay for it.

Listen to what the late pastor and Bible expositor, Donald Grey Barnhouse, said about people who believe they are saved, but who, in fact have been deceived by mixing grace and the free gift of salvation with some form of work. He wrote, nearly sixty years ago, these timeless words,

There is a category of people who will be absent from heaven and who will be the angriest at their exclusion. These are those who say that they believe that Jesus Christ is God, and that salvation is by His death upon the cross, who [believe] in miracles and in the inspiration of scripture, but who add some other condition to salvation than that of unmerited grace. There are those who are orthodox as to the person and the work of Christ, who add, for example, that in addition to such faith, one must observe Saturday as the Sabbath; there are still others who are orthodox as to the person and work of Christ, but who hold that the waters of baptism take away original sin. I believe that the church is honeycombed with such false believers who have adopted a mental attitude of acceptance of the orthodox position about the person of Christ and the fact that He is the one and only Saviour, but who, in fact, refuse to turn away from everything that is of the flesh and of the law, in order to be saved by Christ alone. These constitute perhaps, the greatest number of the tares which resemble the true wheat of the real children of the Kingdom.ⁱⁱ

Could this be true? Yes. Consider the number of people who will stand before the Lord on the day of judgment and be cast into hell, but will first remind the holy Judge that they prophesied, preached, and served in the name of Jesus. He will say, “I never knew you. You never received the free gift of salvation.”

Notice verse 14 again,

For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified

Paul makes it clear that placing your faith in the Law is to nullify any hope of having received the promise of salvation, which is offered through faith in Christ's perfection alone.

Trusting in the Law requires a penalty for lawbreakers

2. Secondly, Paul continues, trusting in the Law requires a penalty for lawbreakers.

Notice what he writes in verse 15.

for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.

He does not mean that without a record of the Law, there is no such thing as sin. What he means is that violations of the Law only occur where there is Law.

For example, as I traveled with some missionaries on the autobahn in Europe several years ago, driving well over a hundred miles an hour, believing this was truly the way to travel, we were not breaking the law. We were, in fact, passed by sports cars, as if we were barely moving, and they were not breaking the law either. The reason we were not breaking the law is that the law of a speed limit does not exist on the autobahn.

I also rode on a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, a few years ago in Africa, and raced down a dirt airstrip that was used by the missionary pilots. I nudged that bike up to sixty miles per hour and did not wear a helmet, but I was not breaking the law. It was idiotic, but not unlawful, because there was no helmet law posted in that part of West Africa.

The Jewish reader that Paul is addressing in these verses, is depending on getting into heaven because he happens to know the Law! Paul is simply saying, "Listen, that Law, which you are depending on for your salvation, is actually going to condemn you because you have known the Law and have broken it!"

In other words, "You've seen the speed limit signs, and you've knowingly broken them."

The Jew was not supposed to hope in the Law, they had broken the law. No! The Law had another purpose for existing. Paul wrote to the early church, in Galatians, chapter 3, verse 24,

Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.

The word "tutor," or "paidagogos," in the Greek, gives us our transliterated word, "pedagogy," which means, "the laws of teaching". It literally referred to a slave, in Paul's day, who was entrusted with a boy, between the ages of six and sixteen. It was his duty to lead him correctly and guard him; to make sure he arrived where he was supposed to be, whether at school or at some amusement.

What then, is the actual purpose of the Law? To lead us; to make sure we arrive where we are supposed to, which is at the foot of the cross.

The tutor cannot solve the problem, he can only take the person to the solution. The Law cannot:

- cleanse guilt, it can only reveal guilt;
- show mercy, it can only show our need for mercy;
- save, it can only tutor toward the understanding of our need for a Savior!

The Law is like:

- the hallway mirror, showing your unkempt hair and dirty face, with absolutely no ability to clean you; it is designed to make you want soap, water, and a comb, but it cannot wash, comb, or straighten anything;
- the bathroom scales, revealing what your weight is, but can never help you lose weight;
- an x-ray machine, revealing the cancer, but cannot cure anything.

Paul says, "Do you want to trust in the Law to save you? It can do nothing more than reveal what a lawbreaker you've been."

Good News – How One *Does* Receive Eternal Life

Paul now moves to the good news. Look at chapter 4, verse 16.

For this reason . . .

In other words, "Because of everything I've just explained regarding righteous deeds, religious rituals, and religious rules being unable to save . . ."

. . . it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all

Faith, Grace, and Promise

In other words, the Law is overruled by three wonderful words. Underline them in your text. They are:

1. faith – this is trusting in what Christ has done for you;
2. grace – this is receiving, though undeserving, that which Christ offers you;
3. promise – this is believing that which Christ guarantees for you.

Salvation is just that simple! It is by means of faith in the gracious guarantee of God.

Promise

One of the three words that you noted was the word “promise”. It is the same word that is found in verse 13, when it says,

... the promise to Abraham ...

There are at least two different Greek words for the English word “promise”.

“huposchesis” – promise with conditions

1. One Greek word for promise is, “huposchesis,” which is a promise with conditions; that is, “I promise to do this, if you promise to do that.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul did not use that word in these verses. God did not say to Abraham, “Abraham, I promise that I will do this for you, if you promise you will do something for Me.”

That type of promise would have been the Greek word “huposchesis”.

“epaggelia” – unconditional promise

2. The other Greek word for promise is, “epaggelia” (pronounced epangelia), which is referred to as a promise without any “strings” attached; as an unconditional promise emanating from the goodness of someone’s heart.

This is the word Paul used in verses 13 and 16. In other words, the promise of salvation is unconditional. It is not delivered to someone because they are good; it is given because the giver of the promise intends to keep his word.

Can God ever fail to keep His word? No. Therefore, the promise will never fail.

I usually have a little fun at wedding rehearsals that I conduct. I have the couple practice the wedding vows, but slightly change the words in order to make a point.

I will ask them to repeat after me, “I, Monica, take you, Tim, . . . for richer or for richer.”

I get them to laugh at that subtle little change, although later in life it might not be as funny, as they may become poor as dirt. The promise means, however, “No matter how rich we are or how poor we get, I am equally committed to you in both lifestyles.”

“Repeat after me,” I will say, “for better or for worse.”

That is a good promise to remember. All the women will say later, “Yea, but I didn’t know it could get this worse,” right?!

Just remember the secret of one woman’s success. Roderick McFarlane’s grandmother, on her fiftieth wedding anniversary, revealed the secret of her long and happy marriage. She said to the guests, when asked for her secret, “Well, on my wedding day, I decided to choose ten of my husband’s faults, which, for the sake of our marriage, I would overlook.”

One of the guests asked her to name the faults. “To tell you the truth,” she replied, “I never did get around to writing them down. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, ‘Lucky for him, that’s one of the ten.’”

I believe every wife ought to do that. Amen?!

Those vows made at the front of a church or chapel, or in front of a justice of the peace were promises that you intended to keep. That is why you rented your tuxedo and those shiny black shoes, but you did not rent your wedding ring. You do not rent wedding rings for the weekend.

Vows are promises without loopholes. Yet, they are dependant upon the character of those making them, right? Sometimes they are broken.

However, Abraham, and every one of you, were given a vow from God, whose word will never be broken! For Paul, Abraham is the evidence, presented before the entire nation of Jews and Gentiles, that salvation is a matter of grace and faith in Christ alone.

Salvation does not depend upon natural birth, but spiritual birth. It is not a matter of a national heritage, but of spiritual inheritance. It is not something you are born into, but something you are born again into. It is not the gospel of race . . . it is the gospel of grace.^{iv}

Imagine the grace of the Chase National Bank executives, who gave to that unsuspecting customer, the money he expected to borrow. That man did not deserve the gift, but he got it anyway.

Do you think for a minute, however, that Chase National Bank struggled over that six hundred dollars that they gave away? Do you think their finance department strained one bit over the size of that gift? Not a chance! They could have quadrupled it without breaking a sweat!

My friend, do you think that God put heaven's reservoir at risk by paying off your spiritual debt? Do you think you have so much to be forgiven of that God strained and stretched His limits when He lavished His grace upon you? Do you think that somehow, you need to help reimburse the bank of heaven in order for God to keep His promise? Are you afraid that His grace is not great enough to wipe away your sin?

His grace is great enough and deep enough to cover everything about you. His promise is strong enough to stand the weakness of your flesh and the shallowness of your faith.

The promise does not depend on those who receive; it depends on the One who gave it. And, who is this One who promised?

For those who have received this promise by faith alone, what could you ever give back to God? What could you give other than praise, worship, and obedience, motivated by gratitude because, by grace, He handed to you, someone deeply in debt to sin, the gift that erased the liability, freed your soul, and poured into your bankrupt account the riches of His glory and righteousness.

Do you want to get to heaven by trying to keep the Law? Go ahead and try, but you will never be able to do it. In fact, you will only nullify the free gift, as well as stand condemned one day, by the very Law you tried to keep.

Receive the promise instead. Receive the unconditional gift of grace through faith in Christ, which overrules the Law.

When I began this series entitled, "Father Abraham," I read the words of a poem that was written in the mid-1800's. Perhaps after several weeks in this great chapter, the words will mean even more to you. The hymn writer worded it this way,

*Not what these hands have done
Can save this guilty soul;
Not what this toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do
Can give me peace with God,
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears,
Can bear my awful load,
Thy work alone, O Christ,
Can ease this weight of sin;
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God,
Can give me peace within,
Thy grace alone, O God,
To me can pardon speak,
Thy power alone, O Son of God,
Can this sore bondage break,
I bless the Anointed One of God;
I rest on love divine;
And, with faltering lip and heart,
I call this Savior mine.^v*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/29/2002 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans Vol. 2 (Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), p. 289.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 290.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Barclay, The Letters to the Corinthians (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1975), p. 68.

^{iv} Ralph Laurin, Romans: Where Life Begins (Grand Rapids, MI, Kregel Publications, 1988), p. 140.

^v R. Kent Hughes, Romans: Righteousness From Heaven (Wheaton, IL, Crossway Books, 1991), p. 95.