

Living by Faith in a Hostile World

Sermon Series

Part 1: The Faith of Abraham: Righteousness Apart from Works

Romans 4:13–25 | Matthew 9:9–13

1. THE BALANCE SHEET

Sometime in the late first century, a runaway slave sat down and read a letter.

His name was Onesimus. He had served in the household of a man named Philemon, a Christian of some standing in the church at Colossae. At some point—we do not know exactly when or how—Onesimus had fled. He had run from his master, and it is likely that he had taken something with him when he left. Money, perhaps. Goods from the household. The ancient letter that survives does not say precisely, but Paul’s language in that letter leaves little doubt: Onesimus owed Philemon a debt. And when a runaway slave owes his master a debt, there is no scenario in which that ends well.

By the time that letter found him, Onesimus had somehow made his way to Paul, imprisoned in Rome, and had come to faith in Christ. Now Paul was sending him back. And in the apostle’s hand was a letter that would determine everything.

We will come back to that letter. But first, a question that hangs over this entire sermon series, and over your life in this increasingly hostile world: What does it mean to be right with God?

Not what does it mean to be a decent person. Not what does it mean to be religious, or churchgoing, or morally above average. What does it mean to stand before the living God and have nothing to fear?

The world around you has its answers ready. Be kind. Do more good than harm. Try hard. Give to charity. The world has constructed an elaborate ledger system, and the assumption underneath all of it is the same: if your good entries outnumber your bad entries, you will be all right.

And if you are honest this morning, you will admit that you sometimes run your spiritual life on exactly the same accounting system. You feel closer to God on the days when you have been patient with your children, when you have read your Bible, when you have given generously. You feel farther from God on the days when you have lost your temper, when you have been selfish, when you have failed in ways that you hoped no one noticed. You are keeping a ledger. And somewhere in the back of your mind, you are not entirely sure which side is winning.

II. RECONCILING THE NUMBERS

This is not a new problem. It is, in fact, the oldest problem in the world, and the apostle Paul names it with precision in Romans 4.

Paul has been making the case that righteousness before God—being right with God, standing clean before the divine court—comes not by works of the law but by grace through faith. And to prove it, he goes all the way back to Abraham. Not to Moses, not to the prophets, not to the giving of the law at Sinai. All the way back to the father of the faith, the man from whom all of Israel traces its lineage.

And here is what he shows: the promise came to Abraham before the law existed. Circumcision had not yet been given. The commandments had not yet been handed down. There was no religious system in place,

no checklist to complete, no ritual to perform. There was only a promise from God that seemed, by every human measure, impossible.

Abraham was as good as dead, Paul writes. His body was worn out. Sarah's womb had never been able to conceive, and now she was far past the age of bearing. The biology was against them. The years were against them. Everything that could be counted and measured and assessed said: this is finished. There is nothing left here.

And yet Abraham believed.

Not because he had earned the right to believe. Not because he had accumulated sufficient religious merit to claim God's promise. He believed because God spoke, and God's word was enough. And God credited that faith to Abraham as righteousness. Not as partial payment on a debt. Not as a deposit against future performance. Credited. Imputed. Declared righteous, right then, by grace.

Here is where the law does its necessary and painful work: you are not Abraham. None of us is. We have been given far more than Abraham. We have the completed scriptures. We have the testimony of the resurrection. We have the sacraments, the word preached, the community of the church. And still, we run our spiritual lives on the ledger system. Still, we lie awake at night wondering if we are good enough. Still, we perform our religion for an audience of one, hoping that God is watching and that the scales are tipping our way.

Paul writes that the law brings wrath, because if it is those who are of the law who are heirs, then faith is null and the promise is void. You cannot have it both ways. If righteousness before God is something you earn, then it must be earned perfectly, completely, without remainder. And there is not one person in this room who can do that.

We are all Onesimus. We have run. We have taken what did not belong to us, spent what was not ours to spend. And we owe a debt we cannot repay.

III. GOD'S GIFT OF GRACE

Now we come back to that letter.

Paul writes to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. And near the end, he does something extraordinary. He writes: "If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it."

Read that again slowly. Charge that to my account.

Paul is not asking Philemon to pretend the debt does not exist. He is not asking him to overlook it or minimize it or call it something other than what it is. The debt is real. The wrong is real. What Paul is doing is stepping in between Onesimus and Philemon and saying: put it on me. Whatever he owes, I will cover it. Whatever he has taken, count it against my name, not his.

This is not a metaphor for imputation. This is imputation. This is the doctrine of righteousness credited by grace through faith enacted in a real letter, between real people, in the first-century church.

And it is the answer to everything Paul has been saying in Romans 4.

Abraham had a debt he could not pay. Every human being, by the reckoning of God's holy law, stands in default. We have taken what did not belong to us. We have run from the Master. But into that deficit steps the one who alone had the standing to do it. Not Paul, who was himself a sinner. But the Son of God, who was not. Jesus Christ, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised on the third day, ascended to the right hand of the Father. He wrote the letter. He said, with his own hand, with his own blood: charge that to my account.

Every sin you have committed. Charge it to my account.

Every failure you have hidden. Charge it to my account.

Every debt you cannot repay. I will repay it.

And the Father accepted that payment. This is the entire point of the resurrection. The empty tomb is the Father's declaration that the debt has been settled. Christ did not remain in the grave because there was no remaining balance. The ledger is closed. Paid in full.

This is why Paul can write that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness, and then immediately add: "But the words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Romans 4:23–25). The same transaction that happened for Abraham happens for you. You believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead, and God credits that faith as righteousness.

This is what Jesus was enacting when he walked past Matthew's tax booth. Matthew was precisely the wrong sort of person: a collaborator, a man who had made his living squeezing his own neighbors on behalf of Rome. And Jesus said: follow me. He went to Matthew's house and ate with tax collectors and sinners while the Pharisees stood outside calculating why this was disqualifying. And Jesus answered them from Hosea: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." He came for Onesimus. He came for Matthew. He came for you.

IV. JUSTIFICATION

Onesimus went back to Colossae with Paul's letter in his hands.

We do not know exactly what happened when he arrived. But we know this: Onesimus returned not as a man trying to work off his debt through future good behavior, hoping that enough years of faithful service would eventually balance what he owed. He returned as a man whose debt had already been covered. Paul had put his own name on the line. The account had been charged to another.

That changes how you walk through a door.

You do not walk in cringing, calculating, performing. You walk in as someone who has been set free from the arithmetic of debt. What was owed has been paid. What was taken has been covered. You are not earning your way back into favor. You are living inside a favor that has already been declared.

This is the freedom Paul holds out to you this morning. Freedom from the crushing weight of the ledger system. Freedom from the spiritual performance anxiety that wakes you up at three in the morning and asks whether you are doing enough, whether you are good enough, whether God is satisfied with you.

The answer to all of those questions is not found in what you have done. It is found in what Christ has done. He was delivered over to death for our trespasses. He was raised for our justification. The accounting is complete. The transaction is settled. God has credited righteousness to all who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

You are not Onesimus trying to earn his way back. You are Onesimus walking through the door with Paul's letter in your hands. The debt is covered. The name on the account is not yours.

In a world that will spend the next week telling you that you need to do more, be more, earn more, perform more, the most countercultural thing you can do is rest in the righteousness of Christ. Not as passivity. Not as an excuse for carelessness. But as the deep, settled confidence of a person who knows that their standing before God does not rise and fall with their performance.

The ledger is closed. Christ has written his name in your place. Walk through the door.

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