**Counted As Righteousness**

**Genesis 15:1-6**

Trinity I

06.06.2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text finds the Word of the Lord coming to Abram just as he returned from defeating the Amalekites and the Amorites. (The Word of the Lord is the second person of the Trinity before He took on flesh in the womb of Mary – God’s Christ.) They had come in and defeated the kings under whom Abram’s kinsman Lot lived, and had taken Lot and many others captive. Abram went with his men and freed Lot, rescued all the other captives, and brought back the spoils. The previously defeated kings came before Abram to thank him. Abram gave them all the spoils and returned their people to them. He kept nothing!

Many think Abram a great man, but Abram recognized that it was God who had delivered his enemies into his hands, that God had won the battle. God promises Abram that he will be a great, his very own son will be great nation, and his offspring will number like the stars of heaven. You and I, and all those who have faith in Christ, are by faith, Abram’s offspring

Abram believed the Lord and it was counted, imputed to him as righteousness. That is simply amazing. Abram’s faith trusts God’s promise, and his trusting of God is credited to him as righteousness.

Righteousness might be summarized as that which is necessary to get into heaven. When Jesus taught on the side of the mountain, he proclaimed,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt. 5:17-20)

Jesus tells them that their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. In fact, Jesus says, in that same sermon on the mount, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt. 5:48) There is the command from Jesus, God Himself in human flesh. Righteousness must equal perfection.

Dearly beloved of God, this whole righteousness and perfection thing concerns me gravely because there are so many who are confused about it. So many people feel that there is something that they must do in order to be declared righteous. I cannot tell you how many conversations I have had with lifelong, loyal, regular attendees of Lutheran congregations – whether I was their pastor or they were from other Lutheran congregations who I have encountered out and about – who do not understand how righteousness comes to them. They regularly hear the Gospel of Christ Jesus proclaimed, yet they still do not understand.

What am I talking about? I am speaking of people who attend services week after week in congregations where the Gospel is proclaimed in truth and purity, and who express the fact that they are not sure if they are going to heaven.

I have had numerous conversations in grocery stores, WalMart, gas stations, the Post Office, the narthex of this congregation, at hospital bedsides, and many other places which go something like this.

“How are you today?”

Responses go something like, “It’s another day above ground,” or, “At least I woke up this morning.”

I respond, “I’m looking forward to my flesh being below ground,” or, “I want the day where I don’t wake up here on earth.”

I usually get the ‘you-just-shot-my-favorite-dog’ look and the question, “Why?”

“When my body is six feet under the dirt or I don’t wake up in my bed, I’ll be in heaven.”

Statements vary, but ultimately I express the attitude that I am absolutely certain I am going to heaven.

It is after expressing my certainty of heaven that the conversation takes a very, very sad turn. Again, the statements are not verbatim but they mean the same thing. They bow their head in shame and say, “I wish I could be that certain.”

“Why aren’t you?”

“Well Pastor, I hate to admit it, I’m not perfect! I don’t know if I have done enough to get into heaven?”

At this point I am absolutely saddened by the thoughts of this dearly beloved child of God. At this point, standing before me, is someone who is uncertain if they are going to heaven or not! These individuals have doubts, will they spend eternity with their Lord, or they will suffer the eternal torments of hell? How many of us sometimes stand in their shoes?

What do they believe guarantees their entrance into heaven? They believe eternal is based upon whether they have been good enough or not! If our righteousness and eternal kingdom were based upon such things, they would be absolutely right. Based upon our works – our deeds – how we have lived, we are not righteous and could never be confident of heaven.

Ever wonder why we confess that we are sinful and unclean, that we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed by what we have done and what we have left undone? Or, that we confess that we are poor, miserable, sinners/

Dear friends whenever such a conversation takes place, who is standing before the person I am talking with?

The correct answer is, a slime ball! The scum of the earth! A worm, and no man! A most depraved sinner! ME!

“But you are a pastor?”

Yeah, I’m a pastor. But what does that question mean when people ask? Does that mean I am perfect and without sin? It is amazing what some people think pastors are supposed to be. Did God choose them because they are better than other people? No! God chooses men to His pastors because He chooses them. Sometimes I think He chose me to show just how gracious and forgiving He is, to proclaim in living black and white that He is a God of mercy and grace.

Each and every one of us is in the same boat. We are all sinners! No, there is not, nor has there ever been, nor will there ever be, someone who, by their own life and work, deserves heaven, except of course, Jesus, the God-man. It was for our imperfection that God’s Christ took on human flesh. Paul explains it this way in Romans. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:19)

On the cross, Jesus said, “tetelestai!” “It is finished! It is completed! It is accomplished!” And then He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

The work of God to purchase forgiveness for ***all sins*** was tetelestai, finished, completed, accomplished. Those who trust in what Christ has done upon the cross, believing that, as God promised, this is their forgiveness and righteousness, receive Christ’s righteousness by faith. It means that Christ’s perfect righteousness was sacrificed, that sacrifice accomplished putting the consequences of unrighteousness – sin and death – to death upon the cross. You are righteous in Christ! As Christ is perfect, so you are perfect in Christ. You are without sin, in Christ. All this is yours by faith – in Christ.

When the dearly beloved of God bow their heads in sorrow, believing that they have not done enough to get into heaven are, without even knowing it, spitting on the work of Christ. To think there is a possibility that I might not get into heaven because I have not tried hard enough, have not done enough, was not good enough, or any such thing, is to take Jesus down from the cross and say, “OK, I’ll take care of the rest myself. Jesus, it wasn’t really finished, you didn’t really accomplish it all, there is still something left I must do.”

Dearly beloved of God, this sort of thinking is the work of Satan in us.

How can what Jesus did make us righteous? Last week you heard again John 3:16 say, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” Whoever BELIEVES – has eternal life. There is nothing in that verse hinting at what we do or do not do to help obtain eternal life. Believe! That is what Abram did, he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

It is true, *there are none that are righteous, no not one.* (Rom. 3:10) Who are the righteous? *The righteous are those who live by faith.* (Rom. 1:17) And even faith is God’s gift to us, wrought in us by the Holy Spirit. Paul explains how that works in his letter to the Ephesians. *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this (faith) is not of yourselves, it (faith) is the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them*. (Ephes. 2:8-10) As it says, even faith is God’s work in us so that nobody can boast even of that.

This is why we gather together like this today. We gather so that we might have our faith strengthened. As Paul tells us. *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.* (Rom. 10:17)

We confessed we were all sinners, but it didn’t end there. What Christ did, His perfect righteousness sacrificed unto death upon the cross, is imputed to you – it is declared to you – it becomes yours as it enters your ears in the absolution you hear this Word of Christ. And the Spirit moves you to cling to it by faith. You believe the Lord, and His righteousness is counted to you as righteousness. By faith in Christ, His perfection is yours!

You come to the table today. It is the table that Christ our Lord prepared and furnished with His righteous flesh pierced for you, and His perfect blood shed upon the cross for you. It is a meal which requires hungry hearts that come believing the Word of Christ, “given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” The Spirit brings you to this table trusting that you are consuming the flesh of Christ and drinking His precious blood. In so eating, you receive forgiveness of sins, your faith is strengthened, you believe the Word of Christ, and it is counted to you as righteousness.

It is like Luther said, where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation. Faith is God’s work in you to trust and believe that Christ’s forgiveness is for you. Believe and it is counted to you as righteousness. Amen.