

Join us for

Wednesday Night Bible Study



Berea Christian Church

Our Teacher

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“The Just Shall Live by Faith” - Condition or Characteristic?

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(Part 1)

In opposition to the extrabiblical and ritual-based scheme of human redemption which was devised and promoted by Romanists, our Protestant mothers and fathers championed “justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.” *Sola fide* (Latin: “faith alone”) became the war-cry of those who strove mightily for a recovery of and return to the biblical gospel of grace, against those who argued that slavish adherence to the dictates of the Roman Catholic religion was necessary to merit a place in heaven and immortal glory. These brave saints were heroes among church history’s “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), but, in many cases, they were men and women of their time, struggling for liberation from the theological constraints which they inherited as a result of their Romanist upbringing. As the Russian Orthodox theologian Alexis Khomiakov wrote in 1846 (although with obviously biased over-statement): “All Protestants are Crypto-Papists...to use the concise language of algebra, all the West knows but one datum a ; whether it be preceded by the positive sign $+$, as with the Romanists, or with the negative $-$, as with the Protestants, the a remains the same.” Protestants often remain more Roman in their theological presuppositions than even they may realize.

Here is a lesson for all of us who name the Name of Christ: no one begins his Christian pilgrimage as a lone traveler; rather, we all enter in the company of others, trusting in the authority of those within our community of faith to whom we look for guidance in matters of faith and practice. Our faith – at least initially – is largely an inherited one, and we are required to travel on the shoulders of others until we grow strong enough to walk and run on our own. This makes the task of critical theological thinking, being “Berean” or “Ephesian” with respect to our religious authority (cf. Acts 17:10-11 and Rev. 2:2, note also Galatians 1:8-9), all the more important.

Our Protestant forebears were reared in and rightly rebelled against an ecclesiastical context in which salvation was determined by one’s faithfulness to the authority of the Roman Church, a religious authority that purported to furnish the life of the believer with cradle-to-grave rituals that would ensure, if properly observed, happiness after death. Adherence to prescribed sacraments, such as baptism at birth, to so-called “last rites” at the point of death, to Mass being performed in your name after death, became the measure, under the guidance of the Roman hierarchy, by which the faithful could assess their odds at achieving eternal life. When Protestants, beginning with Wycliffe, Hus, and Luther, began to question the biblical basis for Rome’s claims to supremacy in spiritual matters, they naturally rejected the Roman sacraments as unbiblical and unnecessary. These women and men, benefitting from the Guttenberg Revolution of 1450 that made the production of Bibles easier and more affordable, discovered in Genesis 15:6 that “[Abram] believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (KJV). These godly interpreters discovered here the only requirement for right standing before God, and that being *faith*. Baptism, masses, penance, as well as any and all other Roman rituals, were rejected as being without biblical authority; that which God demanded was faith alone.

While they were correct in recognizing the complete lack of biblical support for Roman Catholic religious rituals, our Protestant forebears struggled to imagine a God who did not require *something* of us in our pursuit of heaven and immortal glory, and that *something* according to their reading of Genesis 15:6 was Abram's faith. God promised the Patriarch a blessing; the Patriarch believed in the promises of God; God reckoned the Patriarch righteous as a consequence/reward for that display of faith. In general, Protestants replaced the manifold rituals of the Roman faith with the one biblical ritual (as they saw it) of simple trust in the Word of God. The problem remains, however, that they were assuming ritualistic regeneration in their interpretation of passages like Genesis 15:6; the washing and renewal of the Holy Spirit was predicated upon a correct human response to the demands of the Divine. These well-intentioned Protestants had succeeded in extricating themselves from the ditch of Roman ritual only to find themselves entrapped in the opposite ditch of Protestant ritual regeneration.

A helpful corrective to this unfortunate error is found in the Apostle Paul's own commentary of Genesis 15:6, found in Romans 4:1-11. There he begins his treatment of Abraham's experience by inquiring in verses 1, "What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?" Against the rendering of many modern commentators, Paul is not identifying the Patriarch as "Abraham, the forefather of us Jews" (TNIV). Paul is writing to a Roman congregation comprised predominately of Gentile believers, in a letter where he repeatedly insists that Abraham is the spiritual father of both elect Jews and Gentiles, and where he boldly asserts that Jewishness is not a matter of race, but of grace. Therefore, it is better to understand, with the KJV translators, that the Greek text underlying our English text of Romans is questioning that which "Abraham our father (i.e., the spiritual forebear of both Jews and Gentiles) has discovered from the vantage-point of human experience (i.e., "as pertaining to the flesh"). Paul's inspired interpretation, then, understands Genesis 15:6 as an examination of the results of the application of faith *from Abraham's perspective*, rather than *from God's perspective*.

This is confirmed by the next two verses in Romans 4: "For if Abraham were justified by works (i.e., self-satisfied with respect to his standing before God as a consequence of his correct conduct, and the entirety of this transaction, again, being viewed from his finite human perspective), he hath *whereof* to glory (i.e., if, in his human experience, Abraham's quest for right-standing before God was satisfied by his own human efforts, then God would be robbed of glory, in that Abraham would find room in his flesh to boast before God). In the context of this section of Romans, Paul is arguing that genuine soul-satisfaction, or an assurance of "right-ness" in one's pursuit of God, can never be achieved through good works or law-keeping, and that by design, so that God can be the God of both Jews (who possess the Law) and Gentiles (who do not possess that Law; cf., 3:28-30). Paul then, in our text, offers Abraham as *the* approved biblical example of someone whose conscience finds relief by simply trusting the promises of God (ultimately fulfilled in Christ), rather than through religious ritual. Again, according to Paul's commentary here, Genesis 15:6 is not about a man's trusting of God in order to be declared righteous in the courtroom of heaven; it concerns, rather, the human experience of simply resting in the promises God, and the temporal spiritual benefits that flow from that act of trust.

Paul concludes 4:2 with the qualifying phrase, "but not before God." Hypothetically, according to verse 2, if the Patriarch had been "justified by works," that is self-satisfied in the court of his own

conscience, then, while he might have boasted in himself, Abraham would not have grounds to boast before God, because human deeds do not justify the sinner in the courtroom of heaven. Abraham's self-satisfaction would have received a rather cold reception before God's throne of grace because, as Paul will stress in Romans 11:5-6, "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then *it is* no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if *it be* of works, then it is no more grace: otherwise work is no more work." A more concise assertion of this prevailing principle of the graciousness of grace is found in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God."

In my future installments, I will explore how the Genesis 15:6 principle is applied in other critical passages of Scripture, namely Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and James 2:20-26. In the course of examining these passages, we will examine how the historic misunderstanding of Genesis 15:6 has led to untold difficulties in attempting to reconcile these apparently (due to our misinterpretations) contradictory passages.

Grace and peace.

