

## Sermon for Sunday, November 22, 2009

Dr. Dan Doriani

### GRACE IN ACTION

Romans 4:1-8,12

Thanks for your prayers during my trips to Korea and Brazil. I didn't plan to put two such trips so close together, but I believe I learned more because of God's timing. It was good to travel and it's good to be back. The Lord's work in Korea and Brazil is amazing – it's a privilege to share in it. But the Lord's work here is amazing, too. I'm thankful for the church in Seoul and Busan and Goiania and Sao Paulo and also for the church here.

The more I travel, the more I see that the greatest need of every church is the same – to stay close to the gospel of Christ. Every true mission work begins with the proclamation of Christ, empowered by the Spirit and received by faith. But every movement is led by humans. And we inevitably return to our idols and false notions of deliverance from the human dilemma.

The most fundamental and deepest error is the same everywhere. We look to ourselves for salvation or to earn God's favor or blessing. The true Christian never fully returns to the idea that we can be good enough to earn salvation. But we do long to perform. We want to do something, so that God will see and be pleased and bless us. If we falter, we fear punishment. And if we have already done something for God, we may want to do "one more thing." Thus we don't let the gospel sink all the way into the soul. This is the human condition. And it's why we need Romans 4.

#### **The teaching in Romans – thus far**

Romans 3 declared Paul's gospel: Humans are sinners; we fall short of the glory of God. But there is a righteousness from God, apart from law, that comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. We are justified freely by his grace, redeemed by his sacrifice on the cross. Sin no longer controls us and God no longer condemns us. We become his beloved children.

Paul adds that this gospel of justification by faith excludes boasting. If we're justified by faith – right with God by faith, not works – what can we brag about? Our works don't impress the Lord. We do not save ourselves.

Paul knows that this will never sink in right away, so he comments on the life of Abraham to illustrate his point.

In Paul's day Israel's teachers thought Abraham was the best, most righteous, man who ever lived. They knew the Scripture that says, "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). But they took it to mean that his faith produced such good deeds that God approved him as righteous. As they saw, if anyone ever deserved to be right with God by a faith that worked, it was Abraham.<sup>1</sup>

We can see their point. If anyone could boast about works of faithfulness and obedience toward God, it would be Abraham, for he truly did great things, things that might lead men to boast. He obeyed unbearably difficult commands. He endured in the face of terrible disappointment. He toiled away at his duties, he survived by his wits, he took perilous journeys, he fought in terrible battles.

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<sup>1</sup> Cranfield, pages 228-9.

Yet none of it led God to say, "My man! You're the most righteous fellow on earth. You get the Nobel Prize for goodness. You have earned the recognition." This is true even though Abraham did truly remarkable things.

We start with his call. When we first meet Abraham – when God called Abraham, he lived in Ur and then Haran, two of the most advanced cities in that world. These cities had indoor plumbing, libraries, secure walls and prosperity. But the Lord called Abraham away from his safety and security. "Give it up, separate yourself from it", he said. "Become a nomad and go to Canaan."

Genesis 12:1 says, "The Lord said 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.'"

This is a sharp command, backed by a promise of future blessing. He must leave everything safe, familiar and comforting - his family, identity, name and reputation, his social fabric and status. "Leave now," God says, and "I will bless you. I will make you a great nation and a blessing. I will bless and protect you."

Imagine how Abraham trembled to leave his city, to cross trackless desert wastes to a new "home" – a tent and a life of wandering. Many of us can get nervous about a long car trip. We're apprehensive about air travel to foreign lands, about connecting flights, lost luggage and lost sleep, sick passengers and language barriers. But Abraham's journey had to dwarf all such fears.

Paul urges us to "walk in the footsteps of Abraham" (4:12). What an apt phrase: Feel those footsteps as he walks to the city gate, the final embrace of family before he steps through it. Will his supply of food and water be sufficient? Will brigands rob them? He steps onto a road and starts walking. The city recedes steadily. He crests one last hill, takes a final backward glance and treads into unknown lands. He now has no safety, no conveniences, nothing familiar. He is an alien in an alien land. His obedience is truly astounding.

Abraham kept up the pattern of difficult obedience. For example, his nephew Lot came with him. Genesis 13 says squabbles broke out between the shepherds of Abraham and the shepherds of Lot, and Abraham let Lot choose the better land. By faith, Abraham was generous with his nephew.

Eventually, Lot moved into the wicked city of Sodom. War broke out and Lot was captured. Abraham rallied all his men, 300 strong, counterattacked the invaders and rescued Lot, along with many captives and plunder. By faith Abraham battled armies and rescued his kinsman, trusting God for victory.

In the battle Abraham liberated others from Sodom and retook a cache of plunder. The king of Sodom met Abraham and made an offer: "Let me have my people and the plunder is yours." Abraham released the people, but refused the plunder: "I do not want you to be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.'" (Genesis 14).

He wanted no ties with a wicked king. He did not want to be in debt to a godless man. He refused the plunder so he could remain free to serve God without entanglement. It's a wise strategy. It rests on his confidence that God would provide. That confidence liberates us. We know we don't need to compromise to provide for ourselves.

Abraham did other noble things. Remember, he was willing to give up his only son, the beloved son God promised, because the Lord commanded it. So - Did all these deeds cause God to declare Abraham righteous? Not at all.

Abraham had nothing "to boast about... before God." God did not see his works and repay him for them (Romans 4:4-5). God justifies the wicked. Rather, "Abraham believed God, and [that faith] was

credited to him as righteousness" (4:3). God did not justify Abraham after he did some great thing. He justified Abraham at a low point, after he had just finished complaining against God: "Where is my promised son? Why aren't you fulfilling your promises." (Genesis 15:2-3).

By way of reply, God repeated his promise. He took him outside and showed him the evening sky, the clear desert air dazzling with stars, and said "so shall your offspring be." Abraham believed it. So then, right after a moment of aggressive doubt, God counted Abraham's faith as righteousness.

### **Illustration from David - 4:6-8**

David says the same thing (4:6) but in a very different way. Abraham wasn't justified by works, even though he performed so many. On the other hand, David was not condemned, even though he so richly deserved it. Yes, David did much that was noble and good. He was the man after God's own heart. Israel's brave king, defending his people during life-threatening invasions. He ruled in justice, cared for the weak, showed mercy to the oppressed, and refused false praise. He was the sweet singer of Israel.

But he threw it all away over his affair with Bathsheba. Before it was over, he had lied, deceived, stolen. He chose to expose a loyal officer to death on the front lines. He violated God's fundamental laws and inflicted terrible suffering on his friends. He committed the irreversible sin of murder. He had no excuse. He had all he needed and more. His acts were premeditated. He acted publicly and knowingly, and brought shame on his nation and his God.

But David repented. When the prophet Nathan confronted him, he confessed. "I have sinned against the Lord" and made no excuses. He simply waited for grace and God gave it. The prophet said, "The Lord has taken away your sin." Psalm 32:1-2 says "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him."

This is the gospel for sinners. This is the message of Paul, the message that's needed in Seoul and Busan, in Goiania, Manaus, Sao Paulo, and Clayton. It's the message we need to press deep into our hearts.

I suppose you are looking for connections to stewardship Sunday, but I'll let you work on it yourself while I talk about my missions trips a bit.

### **3. Application to giving**

As you know, I was away for two weeks, on related mission trips to Korea and to Brazil. It's possible to view this as a problem: The senior pastor isn't preaching, teaching or answering calls. But I hope you see that you sent me. You sent me to fulfill a vital part of the mission of this church on your behalf. We are a missional church and we have resources that the church around the world needs. Funds, yes. But more than that, a capacity for theological training. We've been called upon to train pastors in Kenya, Haiti, New Zealand, Hungary, Ukraine and other places.

In Brazil and Korea, evangelicals invited me to lecture on the interpretation and application of Scripture. The occasion was the translation of a couple of my books into each language. The goal was to stimulate more and more pastors to become expository preachers.

It works like this: I select my most important lectures and rephrase them so they are as clear, brief and as translatable as possible without over-simplification. I bring extra lectures in case I need to do more, in case I didn't exactly understand my invitation or the needs of the nation.

In India one preliminary sentence cost three hours of tension. "Of course, we all know..." Oops, we don't all know.... Another time I was doing a conference in Hungary. The trip included a one-hour lecture in a seminary, where perhaps one quarter of the professors are Christians. The time was soon over, but the professor, the leading evangelical leaned over and whispered. "Why don't you lecture a little more." I replied, "How much more?" "Oh, another hour." The second hour passed. The professor said,

"Maybe we can keep talking over lunch." That lasted another ninety minutes, a dialogue with the professor and his students. Clearly, I was meeting some need that he perceived in his students. He never told me what it was, but he knew them and his school.

We often arrive with a dim sense of our mission. We ask and the people fill in the blank spaces. We realize: the situation is not quite what we thought. Example: a few years ago, I was in the capital of a country with a strong Christian minority. I was given a CD with a sermon by the pastor of a leading evangelical church. It had thousands of members and prominent citizens. My host hinted that this CD would help me understand my task.

The sermon examined the night before Jesus' crucifixion. The pastor spoke for forty-five minutes, but somehow we never heard about Jesus' crucifixion or resurrection! We never heard that our passage stood at the climax of God's plan of redemption. No, the theme was sleep from Luke 22:45: "Jesus found [the apostles] asleep, exhausted from sorrow."

The pastor explained why we get tired. We should take care of ourselves. He extolled the benefits of sleep: the world looks better when we are rested. Also we should admit our problems, admit when we're sad, just as the Bible admits that the disciples were sad. Every word was true. Much was insightful. But we never heard about Jesus who died and rose for us.

My hosts knew this wasn't right. They knew that moralistic advice about rest would never transform their nation. In Korea, moralism is one reason why Christianity – once growing so fast – has stalled. Wise Koreans know this. They invite outside speakers because they see the problem. So why don't they address it themselves? They do, but sometimes you need an outside voice.

Here a doubt may arise: What can four, five, or even ten lectures accomplish? Is it worth all the effort, the trouble? For some reason, God is pleased to let even one talk, one sentence make a difference. How can this work? We re-present crucial truths and methods in fresh language and somehow it sticks. The same point, heard for third or tenth time suddenly resonates.

But an outside speaker has an advantage. We say, "I don't really know the situation here. But as I've read and listened, it seems... Correct me or ignore me if I'm wrong. Let me know." This helps. If the speaker is wrong, the people have permission to disagree. But the burden falls to the listeners to consider: How would I describe our problems? But if the speaker is right and the people choose to affirm his message, it's a catalyst for constructive change.

On the long flight home, the voice of the skeptic dances around the plane: "Sure, it was a feel-good experience. Lots of people came, they were friendly and they liked it. But what can one set of lectures do – even with a big crowd?"

The answer: More than you might think. A small beginning can lead to amazing results. In Korea, there was essentially no church in 1900. A few missionaries came. The Koreans point to about twenty doctors, translators, educators, evangelists. Today there are eleven to twelve million Christians in a nation of forty-eight million.

Let me tell you about Brazil. Between five hundred to six hundred pastors, seminarians, and local leaders attended my conference in Goiania. In 1980 the evangelicals were a small, struggling group in the largely liberal Presbyterian church of Brazil. Animists, cultural Catholics and some Pentecostals governed the religious scene. There was no serious evangelical and Reformed education for pastors. Then a professor named George van Groningen came to Brazil to offer some lectures for several years. His groups were small, but they were hungry for theological truth.

A few years later, Central Presbyterian supplied essential funds to help the Brazilians start a seminary named for Andrew Jumper, Senior Pastor at Central from 1971-1992. Dr. Jumper and Central also funded the Ph.D. programs for a handful of Brazil's best and brightest. They chose well, selecting young scholars

who were smart, gracious, irresistibly pleasant people. Everyone loves and respects them.

The new seminary was small but its students were leaders and they had an outsized influence. They became leaders of the leaders. Next they started pastors' conferences in Biblical interpretation and theology. They grew and spread, first in Sao Paulo, then in the Amazon, then in Goiania, next in the southwest.

There is more. The conferences proliferated. At least five to six thousand leaders will attend at least one this year. For every pastor who attends, five more listen on the internet or pass a CD to friends. This is all from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Brazil, which is becoming the leading educator of the Protestant church of Brazil. That church is now fifty million strong. But there is more...

The conferences have huge mobile bookstores - piles and piles of books in Portuguese. Books by Calvin, Stott, Carson galore. Even four of mine. Our conference ordered four to five thousand books and sold almost all of them. Lay leaders buy two or three; pastors seem to buy twelve to fifteen. They translated about three books into Portuguese in 2006. Next year, they will translate twenty books, solid evangelical and Reformed works. But there is more.

Angola is a Portuguese-speaking country straight across the Atlantic from Brazil, not too far. The church there is growing fast, but there is no depth or training. So the evangelical Presbyterians of Brazil are starting conferences there.

I don't want this to sound easy. The church started a mission to Chile but the government recently expelled all Brazilian teachers. Still, they are preparing to start another work in Mexico. They understand the principle of the sower... The sower went out to sow. Some seed was devoured at once. Some had a false start and came to naught. Some bore some fruit and then lost the competition with the weeds. But some produced a harvest that dazzled all who saw it.

Now you see the relationship to the call to stewardship. The history of the church in Korea dazzles the mind. Ten or twenty missionaries, facing terrible obstacles, with minimal resources, began a movement that swept the land. In Brazil, one speaker sparked an education-led renewal.

Solomon said we "cast our bread upon the waters" and see what returns (Ecclesiastes 11:1). The sower goes out to sow and sometimes the crop is astonishing.

That is why you give. When we go on mission trips, you send us. You go with us. When we start a neighborhood study – unbelievers invited - we go together. When we visit someone in the hospital or counsel someone in distress, you visit and counsel, too.

In Seoul a Korean pastor grabbed both of my hands and shook them vigorously – a rare gesture in Korea, where people are reserved and rarely touch. He said in halting English, "Thank you so much. I pastor rural church. I so lonely." You took away his loneliness. The same thing happens here every week, if we have eyes to see. You do it; sometimes you do it through others.

Our Bible teaching and sermons are yours. Then you share what you have learned, use the skills you have honed here... That is why you give.

You give to fulfill the great commission – to make disciples of the nations. You give and by giving you participate in God's promise to Abraham "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3).

As Paul says in Romans 4:12, every Christian walks in the footsteps of "our father Abraham... He is the father of all who believe" (4:11-12). That is, everyone's faith is a bit like Abraham's. We need to separate from the safety of home. The Lord needs to take us away from influences that make it hard to hear his voice. But if we follow God where he leads, we can hope to bless the nations on his behalf.

That is why we give. The Bible is a missional book; we are missional people. Mission goes forward because people invest in it. Financially, by prayer and by keeping our eyes open wherever we are: at work, at home, at the store or the gym.

God called Abraham so that he could bless the nations through him and his seed – ultimately Jesus Christ. Abraham was a remarkable man who did wonderful things. But Romans says he laid hold of the blessing of Christ the same way all do – he was justified by the work of Christ, received by faith, not works.

If Abraham, great as he was, was justified by faith, then so it is for us. And if David, sinful as he was, received God's mercy by faith, then so shall we. This message, from God, received by faith, is the ground of our commitment to God's mission. It's why we give our time and treasure, it's why we take risks for the gospel of Christ. The Lord came to come to us, gave himself for us, wooed us to himself and now he invites us into his mission. Join him, join him here.