

This morning I want us to take a trip in the wayback machine – I don't know if any of you of a certain age remember Mr. Peabody & Sherman and their time-traveling machine – but we're going to go back in time and relive some of Dave's greatest hits, some of the greatest accomplishments of my life. We begin in 1982 with my greatest athletic achievement. Back in 1982 I competed in the Hershey's National Track & Field competition and made it to the state meet where, as a ten-year-old running in the 10-12 division, I earned two third-place finishes and a fourth-place finish. Two thirds and a fourth out of the whole state of Florida. It should probably make me sad that my speed peaked in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and I've gotten gradually slower every year since then, but Father Time is undefeated, so they say. So that's my greatest athletic achievement. Fast-forward to 1994 and we find my

greatest artistic achievement. As a senior at the University of Tampa, I was given the award recognizing the most outstanding musician in the school of music. It was quite an honor. Greatest artistic achievement, other than getting to lead you fine people in worship every week, obviously. And then, third, we jump to 2000, where we have my greatest academic achievement, my masters degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Masters in Christian Education. My greatest academic achievement.

Now, why do I have these things? Why does this certificate hang on the wall in my office, and why does this t-shirt and these ribbons and this plaque sit in a plastic tub in my attic? Why do I hang on to these? Well, they represent accomplishment. They represent excellence.

They are the result of hard work and effort and

determination and skill. And not only that, but they bring me joy. It makes me happy to know that my labor was recognized and rewarded, that it meant something. And while a lot of people certainly contributed to the achievement of each of these – my parents, various teachers and coaches – the truth is, my name ended up on those. If there was any glory to be gained, who would it naturally go to? It would go to me, right? Any boasting to be gained from those accomplishments would be mine. My boasting in what I had done, what I had accomplished.

Well, it's one thing to have **something to boast** about athletically or artistically or academically. It's another thing altogether when we talk about spiritual accomplishments. As we've walked through Paul's letter to the church at Rome – the NT book of Romans – we've seen in the first

three chapters how he has established the message of the gospel, by which the righteousness of God is revealed to save anyone who believes. He then explains why we need this good news, why it's necessary. He says that man is inherently, pervasively, hopelessly unrighteous. We have failed and continue to fail to keep God's law. To the point that God has begun to pour out His judgment on mankind by handing us over to the control and the consequences of our sinful desires. And Paul makes it clear that this applies to everyone, to every kind of person and each individual person. All are guilty and deserving of God's righteous wrath for defying His law. And since just trying harder to keep the law is futile – we can't – God has seen fit to reveal His righteousness apart from performing works of the law, righteousness that comes as a gift to be received by faith in Christ alone. And in the passage Caleb

preached two weeks ago, Paul makes it clear that being justified (being declared right before God) by faith alone in Christ alone eliminates any ground for boasting in our accomplishments. But assuming some of his readers (especially his Jewish audience) wouldn't just take his word for it, Paul is going to do what Paul does and prove it. He's going to make his case that justification by faith alone has always been the way God blesses His people. And to make his case, he chooses two OT figures for evidence: Abraham and David. So if you haven't already, go ahead and take your Bibles and turn with me to Romans 4 and follow along as I read vv.1-8 [READ].

He begins with **an example** to illustrate the means of being declared righteous. He begins with Abraham. So why Abraham? Well, for one, he is, to the Jews, their

forefather according to the flesh. He's the physical, biological, genetic father of the Jewish people. And their firm conviction was if ANYONE was a model of piety and holiness and the kind and degree of righteous accomplishment that could earn right standing before God, it was Abraham. And they've got a decent case for that, right? I mean, in Genesis 12, a God that he's never worshipped and never heard from shows up out of nowhere and tells Abraham to pack up and move his family to a place he's never been, not even knowing where he's going, what does Abraham do? He goes. He obeys. In Genesis 17 when God establishes circumcision as a sign of His covenant with Abraham and his descendants and instructs him to circumcise every male, what does Abraham do? He does it. He obeys. In Genesis 22 when God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son who he

loves, what does Abraham do? He does what God tells him. He obeys. Add to that the repeated times you've got Abraham praying and interceding for people, the countless times he goes and rescues his knuckleheaded nephew Lot. He does a whole lot of good, righteous things. Plus, you have all these traditional Jewish writings – not in the Bible, but just writings – that teach that Abraham was “perfect in all his deeds,” and that he “did not sin.” So Abraham is, to the Jewish people, the model of faithful obedience. And the common assumption was that his obedience to God's commands earned him his relationship with the Lord. So Abraham becomes this source of pride for Jews, he is held up as a pattern to follow, and he's used as evidence of Jewish superiority over the Gentiles, who don't even have or know the law to be able to obey it.

So Paul asks what Abraham gained. What did he find to be true, to be the case regarding works and righteousness? If, Paul says, Abraham was justified by his works – if he was granted right standing before God as a result of his obedience to God’s commands – he has a reason to boast. And that makes sense, right? If he worked to earn his relationship with God, it becomes his ribbon, his trophy, his certificate with HIS name on it. Look what I did! If that were the case, he would be totally right to boast about it. But in reality, Paul says, he has NO case for boasting, before God or anyone else? Why, because Abraham’s works actually did NOT justify him. They were NOT the reason God accepted him. And how do we know that? Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, a verse that Jews themselves affirm. And what does Genesis 15:6 say? When promised that God would give him and Sarah a



biological son, even though they were both old and Sarah was barren, Abraham believed God. He trusted in the promise of God to fulfill His word. He relied entirely on God to do what He said He would do. And when Abraham believes God, when he trusts God, God takes that faith, that belief, completely apart from any works that Abraham had done or would do, and counts it as righteousness. He credits, He reckons Abraham's belief as righteousness. Abraham's faith alone fulfilled all that God required to be right before Him. God didn't require works or obedience or law-keeping or faithfulness to be justified. What did God require? Faith alone. Abraham, though entirely unable to fulfill God's promise himself, trusted God to do what God said. And God counted that trust as righteousness on Abraham's behalf. He's the example of HOW God

declares a person right before Him. No works, so no boasting. Faith alone.

Second, Paul uses Abraham's example to establish a **universal principle**. What we saw in Abraham's story is not only true of him. There's a principle of working vs. believing as the basis of our standing before God. First, Paul says, if someone receives something they worked for, what they received is not a gift. Caleb said it a couple of weeks ago. I have never, in all my years of working, sent a thank you note to my employer for my paycheck. It was earned. They owed me that money. They were obligated to give it to me. Your pay is a justly earned reward for your work. It is a result of your ability, your labor. That's how the world works, whether we're talking school or work or athletics. Typically, you get the grade

you earned. You get the pay you worked for. You get the points you score. This weekend, at no point did the officials decide to grant one team points out of the kindness of their hearts. Regardless of how poor you might feel the officiating is, your team has to put the ball in the hoop to put points on the board. You probably heard it from people growing up, maybe your dad or grandpa or uncle: there's no free lunch. And so there's room in that system for boasting. Boasting in your grades, your pay, your wins, your accomplishments.

But God is not obligated to anyone. He doesn't owe anyone anything. And so righteousness (justification) can't be dependent on our works. Instead, God acts graciously, freely giving justification as a GIFT to those who simply believe! Work is about doing and earning; belief is about

receiving. It requires us to abandon all hope in ourselves and our own work and our own righteousness and just believe. But believe what? It's not just some generic belief in something bigger than yourself. It is a complete reliance on a God who justifies the ungodly, who counts the faith of the wicked as righteousness, even when they haven't done anything to earn it. Did you get that? The most vile, immoral, violent, profane, hateful, evil person in the world, if they truly trust in Jesus, can have his faith counted as perfect righteousness in God's sight apart from any works. Now good works will naturally flow out of a transformed heart, but the message Paul wants to drive home here is that a loving, giving, abundantly generous, gracious God, not under any obligation or in debt to anyone, freely justifies those who are profoundly UNRIGHTEOUS, including Abraham himself! Abraham, although put on a

pedestal by his descendants, was not perfect or sinless. He was just as much a sinner as anyone, unable to work his way into right standing before God, and was in need of just as much grace as the worst criminal in history. And the same is true for every one of us. And yet, when we believe, our faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is counted as righteousness. His perfect righteousness, earned through His perfect, sinless life, is imputed to the account of the one who believes. So we can stand before God perfectly righteous, knowing that righteousness is not from us, but belongs to someone else and has been granted to us as a gift. And if that's true, we can't take any credit. There is no boasting except boasting in what Jesus has done. That's the principle.

And then, third, Paul gives **us the benefit**. And he does it by bringing in another OT hero: David. The giant-slayer, the psalmist, the warrior, the king, the man after God's own heart. And his reference to David accomplishes three things. First, it reinforces the truth that God counts righteousness apart from works. Second, it shows that the gift of righteousness and the forgiveness of sin are two sides of the same coin. A person receiving the gift of Christ's righteousness (getting something) and a person NOT having their sins counted against them (having something taken away) go together. You can't have one without the other. Theologians call it double imputation. Our sin gets taken away and put on Jesus as He dies to pay the penalty for it so we can be forgiven, and His righteousness earned by His sinless life is put on our account so we can be declared right before God. But

neither one has anything to do with our works. Just as you can't do enough good works to earn righteousness, you also can't work enough to pay off the debt of your sin. Both are only accomplished by faith in the person and work of Jesus. And this passage that Paul quotes here – Psalm 32 – is especially poignant because David wrote these words **AFTER** his sin with Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. It's **AFTER** his grievous sin that he talks about lawless deeds being forgiven and sin being covered and not counted against him. David isn't writing theoretically here; he's writing what he **KNOWS** personally and intimately. David knows what it is to be forgiven, not because of any works of penance he performed, but simply as a gift of God's grace.

Which is why he can declare that the benefit of this forgiveness and justification is a sense of blessedness. That word means happiness, joy, delight, contentment. The one who, by faith in Jesus, is forgiven and counted righteous, is happy. They're joyful in that. There is a happiness that comes with salvation. There is a happiness that comes with being forgiven. There is a happiness that comes with being declared righteous. In Matthew 5:6 Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Those who desire righteousness, knowing that they can't achieve it through their own good deeds, but trust in Jesus to be and to do for them what they cannot, end up being filled with the things they desired. And as a result, they are blessed. They are happy. If you're a believer today, are you happy? Does the fact that your sins have been forgiven fill you



with joy? Does the fact that you stand before God complete, having a righteousness you had nothing to do with, but that was given to you freely as a gift to be received by faith, delight you? Are you moved by that? Does it warm your heart? Does it stir you to think about it and talk about it and sing about it? If not, are you sure you have it?

Let me ask it this way. What makes you happier: thinking about something you accomplished or something Jesus accomplished for you? What gives you more joy: thinking about your wins, your successes, your achievements, your recognitions or the free gift of God given to you in spite of all your sin and failings, and all you had to do to get it was trust Him? I mean, it sounds absurd to even say it like that, but it needs to be asked. What thrills you more: your team

(your kid) winning the game, your politician winning the election, your vacation, your new car, your boyfriend, your girlfriend, your kids, your grandkids OR that Jesus took away your sin and declared you right in His sight? Some of you need to think about what kind of advertisements you are for Jesus. Would anyone want to know Jesus after seeing the effect He's made on your life? There should be an inexplicable, inexhaustible happiness in the heart of ANYONE who has trusted Jesus. If you're here this morning and you haven't, please believe me. Believe Paul. Believe David. Believe Abraham. Don't look for happiness in what you can attain, what you can achieve, what you can accomplish. All these things that I've collected over the years, all these things I could boast in, all these things that mean something to me and no one else, one day my kids are going to throw all these things in a dumpster. The

same thing will happen to all your worldly accomplishments. What's going to remain for me is the blessedness that comes from my sins not being counted against me and Jesus' righteousness being credited to my account. What will remain for you?