

A God Who Justifies The Ungodly

Romans 4:1-8; James 2:14-26

Well, what James has written this morning, “*Was not Abraham justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?*” has puzzled good Christian believers down through the centuries. Because the verse James quotes here, Genesis 15:6 which says, “*Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.*”, the events depicted in Genesis 15 took place years, perhaps even decades before Isaac was ever born. One night, years after Abraham had journeyed to Canaan and years before Isaac was born, one night Abraham stood up in his tent and asked God in so many words, “*What’s up with these promises you’ve made me? How will you ever save the world through my offspring when you haven’t given me any offspring?*”

And God pulled Abraham outside his tent that night and showed him a sky full of stars and promised him, “*Count the stars if you are able, so shall your offspring be!*” And the story ends with the verse James quoted to us this morning. Abraham took a quick count of the night stars and believed God’s promise. And Genesis tells us that right then, right there, God “*counted*” Abraham’s faith as “*righteousness*”, years before Isaac was ever born, years and years before Abraham ever offered Isaac on any altar. So Moses and Paul both record in Scripture that God justifies people, God declares sinners like you and me righteous at the moment we put our trust in his forgiveness and help.

So Paul wrote in our Call to Worship this morning, Job One for people like you and me, is to understand and believe that there is a God in heaven who “*justifies*” us, who forgives us and makes us his own even while we are still “*ungodly*”. Because in Genesis, in the years between counting the night stars and bringing Isaac up the mountain to put him on the altar, Abraham would make a world of mistakes, got all sorts of things wrong, but God still worked with him because God had decided that Abraham was good and Abraham was his.

And it was only after years of God’s dealing with him that Abraham summoned up the faith to offer Isaac, the boy he loved, back to God, if that’s what God wanted. Abraham obeyed God, trusted God with Isaac, but God had forgiven him, declared him righteous, made Abraham his own years and years before ever asking Abraham to give back the boy God had given him. So why would James write that Abraham was “*justified by works when he offered up Isaac on the altar*” ?

And I don’t think the answer is that James was confused about when God forgave and justified Abraham. I don’t think James is trying to teach that we all have to come up with some spectacular gesture of faith and obedience before God will forgive us and take us as his own. I think what James is saying here is that justification, that forgiveness and that sense of belonging

God gives us before we ever do anything for him, justification always leads somewhere in the lives of the people who really experience it. God forgives us as a gift, owns us without our doing a thing for him.

But once he's done that, once we're forgiven, once we are his and he is ours, God doesn't leave us the people he started with. His Spirit comes to live in our hearts and he changes us into people who can do things, believe in God for things that we never could have done before God justified us. So Abraham trudges up the mountain with his boy, carrying an impossible command in his heart and believing that God will sort it out somehow. And the point here was not that God is a sadist who just wanted to see Abraham sweat.

The point was for believers to see and feel through Abraham what it would cost God the Father to provide justification to people like Abraham and Isaac and us. A just God can't simply excuse sin, sin must be paid for, the consequences must be endured by Someone, not Isaac, and thankfully not you and me, but God's own Son, Abraham's own offspring would be sacrificed so that we could be made right and whole and gain the love and favor that only Jesus could earn for us. And what James is teaching is that real justification must make us more like God in time.

From the moment we trust God and he justifies us, our hearts begin to respond with gratitude and obedience. It may not be much at first, all Rahab knew at first was to throw in with Israel and hope for the best. And that simple gesture saved her and her family on Judgment Day at Jericho. But it didn't end with spies in the attic and scarlet thread hanging from the window. Scripture tells us between the lines that once old Jericho was gone, Rahab married a man from Israel, learned Moses' Law, kept the Sabbath, raised children, and eventually the Canaanite prostitute became the great, great, great grandmother of the Lord Jesus.

The point being that justification, really being forgiven, really belonging to God changes us, leads us to do things that are good and become people who love and please God. Nothing we do can earn us God's grace, but once we get grace, once we belong to him, we learn what's right and do what pleases him. Otherwise, James tells us, it's not real justification.