

God Declares Sinners Righteous for Christ's Sake: A Sermon Study on Romans 4:1–5

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[This is the third in a series of sermon studies on the 12 articles of the Formula of Concord. The Synod's Formula of Concord Anniversary Committee proposed the series to the homiletics department of the Seminary as a part of its planned observance of the anniversaries of the Formula of Concord and of the Book of Concord.]

The doctrine which distinguishes the Lutheran Church from all others is the doctrine of the sinner's justification by grace through faith. This is the article by which the church stands or falls. Luther, who spent his life teaching and defending this doctrine, often remarked: "This doctrine will be obscured again after my death."

Unfortunately Luther's prophecy was fulfilled, and within only three years of his death. In 1549 Andrew Osiander, a former priest, left the Catholic Church and joined the Reformation movement. Osiander's preaching was an attack on the blessed truth that God in grace imputes Christ's perfect life and His innocent death to us for righteousness. It is probably a moot question whether Osiander was returning to the Catholic religion of his childhood or whether he had never really abandoned it. Instead of teaching the *forensic concept* of justification Osiander taught the Roman doctrine that God justifies *by infusion*. Lutheranism teaches that God pronounces the sinner righteous by imputing Christ's merit to him. Osiander now began to teach that God actually infuses into the sinner the essential righteousness which Christ possesses as the Son of God, thus actually transforming the sinner into a righteous person.

Let Osiander speak for himself. "It is apparent that Christ's fulfilling the Law and His suffering and death were accomplished more than 1500 years ago, when we were not in existence. For this reason it cannot be called our justification, but only our redemption and atonement." "The act of our justification is that sin, which is already forgiven but nevertheless still dwells and inheres in our flesh, may be altogether mortified and destroyed in us." "To justify means to make a just man out of an unjust one." "God is not so unrighteous as to regard a person as just in whom there is absolutely nothing of true righteousness."

Article III of the Formula of Concord is the Lutheran Church's response to Osiander. "We believe, teach, and confess that our righteousness before God is that God forgives us our sins out of pure grace, without any work, merit, or worthiness of ours preceding, present, or following, that He presents and imputes to us the righteousness of Christ's obedience, on account of which righteousness we are received into grace by God, and regarded as righteous" (*Concordia Triglotta* 793,2). To advise an alarmed sinner to investigate whether the righteousness and holiness of God is really dwelling in him is to direct him away from the only true comfort. Although "many weaknesses and defects cling to the true believers and truly regenerate, even to the grave, still they must not on that account doubt either their righteousness which has been imputed to them by faith, or the salvation of their souls, but must regard it as certain that for Christ's sake...they have a gracious God" (793,6). "Believers who in Christ through faith have been justified, have in this life first the imputed righteousness of faith, and then also the incipient righteousness of the new obedience. But these two must not be mingled" (927,32). "The contrition that precedes and the good works that follow do not belong to the article of justification before God" (925,27).

Article III is also the Lutheran Church's answer to another ex-priest named Stancarus, who opposed Osiander so vehemently that he fell into the opposite error. According to Stancarus, Christ is our Mediator not according to His deity, but according to His humanity. As the Son of God Jesus was not under the law and did not become obedient to death; He did this only as a human being. Accordingly, then, only Christ's human nature acted to reconcile the sinner to God. The Stancarian error destroys both the unity of Christ's person and the sufficiency of His atonement. If it was only a human being who rendered perfect obedience to God's law for us and who died to cover our disobedience, then the price He paid is inadequate, and we are not redeemed.

To this error of Stancaricus Article III responds: “Even though Christ had been conceived and born without sin...and had fulfilled all righteousness in His human nature alone, and yet had not been true and eternal God, this obedience and suffering of His human nature could not be imputed to us for righteousness...Our righteousness rests not upon one or the other nature, but upon the entire person of Christ, who as *God and man* is our Righteousness” (935,55f).

In 1563 a third and related controversy arose which was also answered by Article III. A Lutheran pastor named George Karg, a former student of Luther, denied that Christ’s obedience to the law had any vicarious merit. He taught that Christ redeemed us only by His passive obedience, His suffering and death.

Article III responds to this error in language that is unmistakably clear. “Christ’s obedience, not only in suffering and dying, but also in this that He in our stead was voluntarily made under the Law and fulfilled it by this obedience, is imputed to us for righteousness, so that on account of this complete obedience, which He rendered His heavenly Father by *doing and suffering, in living and dying*, God forgives our sins...” (919,16).

The reader will want to review for himself the history of the Osiandrian and Stancarian controversies on pages 152–161 of the *Triglotta*.

Of all the books of the Bible it is Paul’s Epistle to the Romans which portrays the doctrine of the sinner’s justification most extensively. And the fourth chapter of that Epistle teaches as clearly as any that justification is a forensic act, an act by which God declares the sinner righteous for Christ’s sake. Our text consists of the first five verses of that chapter.

Verse 1

“What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?”

Paul was engaged in dialog with a Jew, more specifically, with a Jewish objector (2:17–3:20; 3:29–31). As far as the Jews were concerned, if ever a man was justified, it was Abraham. He was the first of the great patriarchs, the founder of the Hebrew nation, the father of believers, the friend of God. As they saw it, Abraham was a man of works. Abraham’s life was full of good works. He followed the Lord’s command to leave his fatherland and family and to follow the Lord to an unknown land. We see him, the childless 75-year-old husband of a 65-year-old wife, take God’s promise at full face value when he looked forward to the birth of a son. And when, 24 years later, God repeated this promise to Abraham, Abraham laughed for joy.

Abraham not only possessed a genuine faith, he demonstrated it. In his dealings with Lot he showed how he left his economic affairs completely in the Lord’s hands. With his readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac he showed not only that he loved God more than he loved his own son, but that he trusted that God could and would raise up Isaac from the dead in order that this son could be the ancestor of the Savior, as God had promised. Humanly speaking, the record of Abraham’s life is one that a man would not have to be ashamed of, one that God should have been impressed with. The case of Abraham would seem, then, to be inconsistent with the doctrine of justification apart from works, as Paul had just enunciated (3:28).

Verse 2

“For if Abraham were justified by works...”

The traditional Jewish conception of Abraham is that he was acceptable to God because he had successfully passed God’s trials and, under the most trying circumstances, had given ready obedience to God’s commands. It was this wrong picture of Abraham which determined the Jews’ conception of their relationship with God. If that picture of the patriarch were true, then he would have something to boast about. He would then have earned a place in God’s family, as well as a place at God’s side forever.

“...but not before God.”

The person who says Abraham’s life was good enough to make him acceptable has not examined Abraham’s life carefully enough. Two examples will illustrate.

Genesis 12 records how the Lord came to Abraham with the great promise of the Seed in whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. No sooner had that great promise been given than its fulfillment was placed in jeopardy by Abraham himself. By passing off Sarah as his sister, Abraham was responsible for Sarah’s being taken into the pharaoh’s harem (Gn. 12:10ff.). Genesis 20 records a similar lapse some two dozen years later. Only a short time previously the Lord had promised that within twelve months Sarah would have a child. Again Satan sought to pollute the womb of Sarah, and again Abraham served as an unthinking accomplice. If the Lord had not intervened and overruled Abraham’s sin, the paternity of Isaac could have been called into question, and an element of doubt would cling to the ancestry of our Lord. Throughout his life Abraham, like all other humans, failed to obey the very fundamental law of love which God requires of every human being—love for God and for people (Mt 22:37–39).

Verse 3

“For what saith...for righteousness.”

Genesis 15:6, the single Old Testament reference to Abraham’s righteousness, speaks not of Abraham’s doing but of his believing. In the matter of Abraham’s being acceptable to God, Abraham was completely passive. It is God who was active.

“Abraham believed (ἐπίστευσεν) God.”

What is the faith by which Abraham was acceptable to God? He simply took God at His word. He first of all believed God’s promise of seed and of the Seed (Ro 4:20). Further, Abraham placed his personal trust in the Savior who was to come from his own line, the promised Seed in whom all families of the earth would be blessed. Twenty centuries later Abraham’s famous Descendant would say: “Abraham rejoiced to see my day” (Jn 8:56).

“...and it was counted (ἐλογίσθη) to him for righteousness.”

Abraham’s faith laid hold of another’s merit, and it was the merit of Abraham’s great Descendant which was credited to Abraham’s account. Cremer-Koegel defines λογίζομαι τι εἰς τι “to reckon something for something; something is transferred to the subject in question and reckoned as his which he in his own person does not have.” Osiander argued that God justifies a sinner by infusing the divine nature of Christ into the person’s make-up to such an extent that his sin is swallowed up. But Paul’s terminology “it was counted unto him” (NIV: “it was credited to him”) denies that. God’s action of crediting something to Abraham’s account did not *make* Abraham righteous; it did not change Abraham. It changed his status before God. Luther correctly described the justified sinner as “*simul justus et peccator*,” a sinner-saint.

Lenski asks: “What is there in the believer’s faith that God can account for righteousness?” He answers: “The contents of his faith, Christ, his ransom, his merit...God’s verdict is only a reckoning, setting down to the man’s credit what he has not earned by working, what another has earned for him...Faith is the hand and the heart filled with Christ. It is not mere believing, but possessing Christ” (*Interpretation of Romans ad loc*).

“...for righteousness.”

Paul’s interest in the first chapters of the Epistle to the Romans is not merely to oppose a wrong view of God’s method of dealing with His Old Testament people. Paul wanted to establish that justification by faith is the heart of Old Testament revelation. The example of Abraham is instructive.

Abraham had failed to live up to the standards God had set for his creatures, and in two particulars. He had first of all failed to provide the complete obedience which God demands. He had not shown the unselfish love which God requires of every human being. Secondly, Abraham had given God something which God had forbidden: disobedience, punishable with death. It was not his love for God or man which led Abraham to pass off Sarah as his sister; it was self-love. Instead of giving God the trust he deserves, Abraham trusted his own ability to see him through a potentially dangerous situation. Not only had Abraham withheld from God that complete obedience which God had demanded, he had actually thrown into God’s face the disobedience God had forbidden. It is this double debt to God which made Abraham and which makes every person “ungodly” (ἀσεβής) in the eyes of the holy God.

Now what was God supposed to do with Abraham’s ἀσέβεια? Should He ignore His own strict requirements, perhaps even withdraw them? It seemed there was no way God could satisfy the demands of His justice and His faithfulness to His word, on the one hand, and the impulse of His saving grace on the other. God found the solution by making use of the principle of substitution.

Jesus Christ obeyed the law of God perfectly as our Substitute, thus giving God the perfect obedience He had demanded but never gotten from His creatures. Or to put that another way: during His whole life Christ *did* what we had *not* done. This is the active obedience of Christ, a facet of His vicarious atonement which frequently does not receive the emphasis in Christian preaching it deserves. And then on Good Friday Christ did the second thing He had to do to straighten out our account with God: He *undid* what we *had* done. He covered our disobedience with His life’s blood. This is the so-called passive obedience of Christ.

Verse 4

“Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.”

If Abraham had earned a place in God’s heart and at His side, God would have been obligated to give him that place as wages due. But Abraham had not earned such a place, and God is under no obligation to give that place to any creature. “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?” (Ro 11:35, NIV)

Verse 5

“But to him that worketh not...righteousness.”

If you have never worked for a certain employer, you cannot demand a paycheck from him. If he nonetheless sends you a check, you know it has to be a gift. This is the way God saw fit to make the precious merit of Jesus Christ available to us. From the first page of the Old Testament to the last page of the New, God’s Word announces: “By grace are ye saved.” If I can even in part earn my way into God’s family, then grace is no longer grace (Ro 11:6). The faith of Abraham may seem to be different from that of the New Testament Christian, but it agrees completely in this essential characteristic, that it is not a work.

“...that justifieth the ungodly...”

Paul’s whole preaching is summed up here. God is a God who justifies the ungodly, the person who has no claim to justification. Osiander and his 20th-century followers may argue that for God to pronounce a guilty person righteous is unethical, and that the forensic concept of justification must be a fiction. Paul’s description of God as the one that “justifieth the ungodly” does, however, not suggest that justification is a fiction, only that it is a miracle.

The thoughts of the text and of Article III may be combined in the following outline:

God Declares Sinners Righteous For Christ's Sake

- I. This truth gives Christ the honor He deserves.
 - A. Abraham's sin carved a gap between him and God.
 1. He had withheld from God the perfect obedience God required.
 2. He had instead rebelled, disobeyed God.
 - B. God solved the problem of Abraham's sin by providing a Substitute.
 1. Christ's active obedience supplied what Abraham had failed to do (Ga 4:4f; Ro 5:19). Karg denied that Christ's obedience had any vicarious merit; but here is our answer when God asks us on Judgment Day: "Have you obeyed my law, as I required?"
 2. Christ's passive obedience covered Abraham's sin against God.
 3. He did this as the God-Man, and so his atonement has infinite worth. Christ's obedience to the law is not just the obedience of a single person. His death is more than the death of just one human being, as Stancarus had alleged. (If he were correct, then Christ's obedience and death would not be adequate for a whole world of sinners.)
 - C. Christ's merit was credited to Abraham by faith.
 1. Taught by Scripture ("justifieth the ungodly").
 2. Denied by Osiander ("Christ justifies us by dwelling in us"). The preacher may wish to point out that this is the Roman Catholic view of justification to this day. ("God makes the sinner righteous by infusing love into him and by leading him to do works that are pleasing to God." cf. Bellarmin: "To be justified through grace is not being accounted just without being just, but in very reality to be just, holy, and immaculate.")
 3. Reaffirmed by Article III: forensic justification.

Application: What if I insist on earning God's favor?

1. I rob God of the honor of being a merciful God and make Him into a salesman who will make His heavenly merchandise available for a price.
2. I rob Jesus Christ of His honor as the perfect, all-sufficient Savior. He has told us: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me." He does not dispense partial forgiveness (100% for the down-and-outer, 60% for the person who can supply 40%). If I am willing to accept 90% of the entry fee into God's family but would like to supply 10% on my own, I insult his gracious offer.

Transition: Luther: "There is no more miserable frame of mind than doubt." God has not called us to wobble through life as uncertainly as a boy learning to ride a bicycle, and then to stumble out into the dark.

- II. This truth gives the sinner the assurance he needs.
 - A. Directing the sinner to his own heart and life for assurance can only lead him to doubt.
 1. Osiander: "Investigation is required whether the righteousness and holiness of God is really dwelling in him."
But the Christian's incipient renewal is imperfect in this life; sin dwells even in the regenerate.
 2. God has not called us to doubt (Jn 8:31f) but to know where we stand with God. (A drowning man going down for the third time doesn't need confidence in himself; he needs a lifesaver.)
 - B. Directing the sinner outside of himself to Christ makes his assurance solid.

1. My response to God's grace is not always what it should be, but God justifies the ungodly. Abraham had this assurance. God says: "I accept you, even though you feel unacceptable. I love you, even though you feel unlovable. No longer need you try to earn My approval; I give you My approval."
2. I can never trust myself, but I can be sure Christ has provided a perfect atonement. Only safe foundation for faith is the *aliena iustitia*, the objective righteousness of Christ, which is outside of us and offered us in the gospel.