

Reckoned As Righteousness

If you know anything about my family you know that we're pet lovers. We have dogs that we have adopted- three of them actually. When we first moved here, we had a dog named Shadow. Shadow was a miniature Schnauzer. She was six or seven years old when we first came to this church. She lived to be sixteen years old. Near the end she slept almost her entire day. She was both nearly totally blind and nearly totally deaf. She really became pitiful at the end, and so we made the decision to put her to sleep. It was just time to let her go.

Shortly after we did that, we started looking around for another dog, and as circumstances would have it, we wound up with two dogs when we were only looking for one. One of the dogs we acquired was a retriever mix name Calpurnia. We call her "Cal" for short.

Cal is the sweetest dog I think I have ever owned. She is just a joy. She's gentle, even-tempered, she's never bitten anybody, but she was a little bit of a challenge. Whoever owned Cal before we did, didn't properly socialize her- and they may have abused her. The result of that was that she was so afraid when we first got her, that she would just sit in the corner and tremble. She was just scared to be in the same room with us.

Cal was actually afraid of everything. She was afraid of dog kennels; she was afraid of bathtubs, but mostly, she was afraid of people. It took us several days to convince her that it was okay for her to trust us.

Eventually she did that, though. It was kind of funny the way it happened. I was sitting on the couch, doing some work, and all of a sudden Cal came over to the couch and jumped up on it and sat down next to me. She finally decided that she could trust me. A day or two later, she did the same with Barbara, and then on with the girls.

That wasn't enough for us. We wanted her to be able to get over all of her fears. We wanted to help her. We did the best we could, but eventually we decided to hire a trainer. We worked with this dog trainer for a while and Cal actually made some progress. She got better under the trainer's guidance.

Cal is one of many dogs I've trained in my life and over time, I've decided that it really comes down to three steps. It's really a matter of learning to communicate with the dog in their language, getting them to trust you, and then setting the boundaries- letting them know what the rules are. If you can do those three things, you can have a wonderful dog.

I'm going through all this because it strikes me that this understanding of how we build a relationship with a dog, really has to do with how we build a relationship with others, including how we build a relationship with God.

Isn't that kind of how our relationship with God works. God communicates with us, and we learn to trust God. Then God sets the boundaries for us. However, there is something that's a little problematic about that understanding. I want to point out something to you about this book (that we call the bible) that you may or may not have noticed. If you haven't, it suggests to me that you need to read this book more. There are a lot of rules in this book.

For example, I'm thinking of the Mosaic Law. The most prominent of those are the Ten Commandments, but there are others. The first five books of the bible are just loaded with laws of all kinds. There are laws that discuss how you hold services in the temple, laws that talk about sacrifices, laws that talk about how the Temple should be built, laws about the garments that the priest should wear, laws about how you should live your life, how you should atone for your sins, etc.

As if there weren't enough laws, the ancient Rabbis decided they needed to interpret those laws so that we could understand them better. As a result, they added a bunch more laws. For example, you're all familiar with the commandment that says, "Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy. Thou shalt do no work." So, the Rabbi's sat around and thought, "What does it mean to work? What constitutes work?" They came up with a long list of things that constitute work. For example, if you sew two stitches, that's work. If you walk two miles, that's work," and so forth. They had a list of things that constituted work.

Humans seem to like to know what the boundaries are- what the rules are- so that they can follow them. There's nothing wrong with that, except that it is possible to make too much of the rules themselves.

I've noticed this tendency in the case of Christians that I have known. I bet that I could look at any person in this room, because I know that all of you are Christians, that I could ask you to recite the Ten Commandments, very few of them would get all of them right. However, I bet most of you would get half or more of them right- just because your whole life you've been taught about the Ten Commandments. I bet if I asked you to recite the Golden Rule, every one of you could do it, just because that's been a huge part of your Christian Education.

Here's the thing. Paul talks about our relationship to the Law and to these moral codes a lot in his writing. What Paul said in this passage that we just read gives us some understanding of how we're supposed to view these laws. Paul uses as an example, as his metaphor, the example of Abraham.

Abraham would have been a familiar figure to anyone who was raised in the Jewish faith, which was many people in the Ancient Roman Empire. Actually, for

about the last half of the history of the Roman Empire, Judaism was the predominant religion in the Empire. About one out of ten people throughout the Empire were Jewish. That was, by far, the largest religious group in the Empire. So, everyone to whom Paul had the opportunity to speak, would have been familiar with this example.

The way he talks about Abraham, though, describes a different relationship from what would have been expected. He doesn't describe this as a relationship between God as the lawgiver and the human being as the obedient servant. He talks about it being a relationship of faith. It's a relationship of faith. It's a relationship between a master and a servant, but it's a relationship with a servant who follows not because they must, but because they have ultimate trust in the master that they follow. That's the difference!

Take Abraham as an example. God comes to Abraham and tells him, "Pack up your family. Get out! I want you to go off into the wilderness. Leave your extended family behind. Leave your job. Leave your reputation. Leave your friends. Leave all of that behind. Go out into the wilderness." God doesn't give him a reason for it, he just says if you do that, I will make you a great nation.

The amazing thing is that Abraham does it. Think for a minute. Imagine that God showed up at your house and said to you, "I want you to get out. Get out of town! Leave your job! Leave your house! Leave your car! Let's just go! We're going to go camping in the woods for a little while, and I will make a great nation of you." How many of you would sign up for that? Not me! But Abraham does it!

Here's the thing that Paul is trying to say here. Abraham is not righteous because he obeyed the law. Most of the Law of God wasn't even written at that time. It was written much later. Paul says that Abraham is righteous because of his faith. Abraham could have said, "No!" Abraham could have said, "You've got to be kidding me!" Abraham could have said, "Are you crazy?" He didn't do that. He picked up and he went.

I want you to notice the argument that Paul uses. He says, "If someone works, it is reckoned to them as righteousness, because it's simply what is due." Think about this in terms of assets and debts. You're trying to earn your salvation. You can do all of the work on the asset side, but there's a negative side- your sins. The trouble is that the cost of salvation is way too high. It's like working for minimum wage and trying to earn enough to buy a Ferrari. You're just not ever going to get there. You just can't earn enough to ever get there. The same thing is true in terms of doing works to earn salvation. Especially since you keep adding to the debt side with your sins. That's the way that works. You just can't possibly earn enough! Those sins keep robbing money from our account!

But faith is different. With faith the entire debt side gets wiped away. It just gets wiped away. There is nothing left but the positive side of the ledger. With sheer belief in the saving power of Jesus Christ, that connotes righteousness.

I don't want to suggest to you that good works are a bad thing- far from it! I just want works to be understood in the proper context. We don't do good works to earn our salvation. As Paul says, that's not possible. We do good works because we've been made righteous. Good works are the result of our righteousness. They're the result of our faith. They're the result of our salvation. They're not the cause of it.

Whatever we do is not reckoned to us as righteousness. What's reckoned to us as righteousness is the faith that we have. It's the belief that we have. I said a few minutes ago, if I asked you to name the Ten Commandments, you probably could name more than half of them. I wonder how many of you could name even one or two of the fruits of the spirit. If you don't know what I'm talking about, when you go home this afternoon, pull out your bible and turn to the fifth chapter of Galatians. Then you'll know what I am talking about. That list shows a proper relationship between the Christian and good works. We show ourselves to be righteous, through the faith that we've had, by displaying the fruits of the spirit. That's the proper relationship to have.

It's our faith that should be our guide. Our faith that should be our mantra. This morning we were talking about confessions in Sunday School. The earliest confession, which is in the bible itself, is "Jesus is Lord." That's the starting point for all Christians. Not the Ten Commandments. Not the Golden Rule. Those are the end points.

We should start with Jesus is Lord. Start with your faith and move onwards, and it will be reckoned to you as righteousness.