

June 7, 2026

Romans 4:13-25:

“When Only One Gives”

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When Only One Gives

Romans 4:13-25

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

Now, I know it's the beginning of June, and I'm about to tell you a Christmas story, but some stories are too good to stay locked to one season. There is an old story by O. Henry called "The Gift of the Magi" that has endured for generations and has been retold many times in popular media. It is about a young married couple living in poverty, with almost nothing to their name. But Christmas is approaching, and each desperately wants to give the other a meaningful gift. The wife's most prized possession is her long, beautiful hair. The husband's is an old pocket watch that belonged to his father and grandfather. Yet neither has enough money to buy a worthy present. So, the wife quietly goes out and sells her hair to buy a fine chain for her husband's watch. At the very same time, unbeknownst to her, the husband sells his watch to buy ornate combs for her beautiful hair.

Finally, Christmas morning arrives, and they exchange gifts. And suddenly the tragedy, and what many may call the beauty of the moment, becomes clear. The chain is useless because the watch is gone. The combs cannot be used because the hair has been cut. By every practical measure, it seems foolish and wasteful. Two gifts that no longer fit the people receiving them. And yet, nobody reads that story and walks away thinking the gifts were meaningless. Because the power of the story was never really in the presents themselves; it was in what each was willing to give up for the sake of the other. It was love revealed through sacrifice.

I. A Void Promise

At first glance, this sounds like a perfect illustration of Christ's sacrificial love. But Paul's point in Romans actually forces us to look at the story from an entirely different angle. You see, we find this story romantic and beautiful because of its transactional nature. But the truth is, we would frame this story far differently if the wife had not sold her hair, but the husband had sold his watch, and vice versa. Then it would be far less romantic, and more of a sad story that would make one or the other look quite uncaring and unloving in the grand scheme of things.

So, if you'll humor me, let's frame the story again. Imagine the husband coming home empty-handed that Christmas. Imagine him watching his wife excitedly hand him the chain she had sacrificed so much to purchase, only for him to shrug and say that he had not gotten her anything at all. Suddenly the story changes. The beauty disappears, and the imbalance becomes painfully obvious. Her sacrifice would stand exposed against his lack of sacrifice. Her love would seem deeper, fuller, and more costly than his own.

The reason the story changes so dramatically when only one person sacrifices is that, in our sinful nature, we understand love through the lens of exchange. We expect love to be met with love and sacrifice with sacrifice. And that same instinct is exactly what St. Paul confronts in Romans 4. Because of our sinful flesh, we want the promises of God to function transactionally. We want inheritance to come through effort and for our salvation to come through our contribution. We want to believe that if God gives us righteousness, we must surely give Him something worthy in return. The irony is that God needs nothing from us.

In many ways, every false religion and every form of heterodoxy finds its root in a refusal to accept that reality. What ultimately distinguishes true Christianity from every other worldview is this: every false system says, "You, sinful man, must do." You must earn, prove yourself, and contribute. You must ascend to God. But the Gospel declares the exact opposite. It announces what God has done for sinners who could do nothing for

themselves. To return to our illustration, it is Christ who gave up everything, and we are the ones who showed up empty-handed to receive. The situation we were in before faith is, in fact, so bad that we weren't even capable of coming to that faith on our own. It is the Spirit through the Word that produces faith in us that results in justification before God.

That is exactly why Paul exposes the sinful flesh by saying, "For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void." The righteous work of Christ and the promises attached to it are so entirely independent of our personal action that the moment salvation becomes something earned, the promise itself collapses. The conclusion Paul drives us to is that the Law does not bring life to sinners.

Rather, it does absolutely nothing but expose them. As written in the text, "The law brings wrath." The Law reveals that we have not loved God as we should. We have not trusted Him above all things. We have not feared Him rightly. And far from bringing God worthy sacrifices, we have spent our lives trying to bargain with Him using half-hearted obedience and polluted righteousness. As Luther is said to have put it, "The law says, 'do this', and it is never done. Grace says, 'believe in this', and everything is already done."

That is why salvation cannot rest upon the Law. If the inheritance depended upon our ability to fulfill God's demands, then the promise made to Abraham would be empty, because sinners contribute nothing capable of securing it. We stand before God far more like the empty-handed husband in that story than we would ever care to admit. We are people who constantly receive from God yet fail to return to Him the perfect love and faithfulness He demands. And if Christianity were merely another exchange relationship, another arrangement where God gives only if we give enough in return, then there would be no Gospel at all. There would only be wrath for those who have failed to uphold their side of the covenant. We would be left with a void promise.

II. A Promise Resting on Grace

The point Paul eloquently makes here is that the promise of God to Abraham did not rest upon Abraham's ability to uphold his side of the arrangement. It rested entirely upon God's grace and the very faith that grace produced in Abraham. And perhaps nowhere is that seen more clearly than in Abraham and Sarah themselves. What did Abraham bring to the promise? An aged body "as good as dead," and a barren wife long past the age of childbearing. Humanly speaking, the promise among many given to him looked impossible. In fact, Abraham himself staggered beneath it at times. Sarah laughed, and Abraham questioned. Both of them looked at themselves and saw exactly what we so often see in ourselves: weakness, failure, and every visible reason to doubt that God could possibly accomplish what He had spoken.

And yet the promise did not collapse under the weight of their weakness because the promise was never grounded in their strength to begin with. It rested entirely upon the faithfulness of God. That is why Paul says, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace." Grace means the promise stands outside of you and that the certainty of salvation does not depend upon the strength of your obedience. It depends upon the God who "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." Abraham believed not because he saw evidence in himself, but because he trusted the God who makes promises to the ungodly and then fulfills them Himself.

The promises of God don't produce nothing. They produce quite the opposite by moving Abraham and us to faithful obedience. Abraham left his homeland when God called him. He even took Isaac up the mountain, trusting that God would somehow remain faithful to His Word. But when we look at that, can we conclude that

these works created the promise or secured it? No. They flowed from it. Abraham acted because he first had been brought to believe that God is gracious and true.

That is the great difference between works born from the Law and works born from faith. The sinful flesh performs works in order to earn something from God. Faith performs works because it has already received everything from God. One is a useless bargaining with the Creator of all things while the other is thanksgiving for what has been received. One attempts to secure God's favor while the other rests in the favor already freely given in Christ. Abraham's obedience mattered greatly, but it was never the foundation of his righteousness. As Paul has already declared, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

III. Righteousness Counted to Us

The same is true for you. The Gospel does not free you from good works; it frees you for them. You see, once a sinner no longer lives terrified that he must earn God's love, he is finally free to love God and serve his neighbor joyfully. The Christian life is not an anxious attempt to uphold our side of some fragile covenant with God. It is the life that naturally flows from people who already know that the promise rests entirely upon grace.

This beautiful promise may lead us to ask, how can a holy God declare ungodly sinners righteous? How can God look upon people who have failed Him repeatedly, whose faith wavers, whose obedience falters, and whose hearts remain stained by sin, and still count them as heirs of eternal life? The answer is found entirely in Jesus Christ. St. Paul concludes this section by directing our eyes away from Abraham and finally onto the One to whom Abraham's faith was always clinging. "It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."

There is the certainty of your salvation. Christ was delivered up for your trespasses. Not only for hypothetical sins or lesser sins, but for all of it. For every moment you failed to fear, love, and trust in God above all things and every selfish act hidden beneath supposedly righteous motives. He was delivered up for every attempt to bargain with God through your own goodness. The Son of God carried it all willingly to the cross. And then, on the third day, He rose again for your justification. Not just your personal justification, but for the sins of the entire world. For all who would be brought to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is why the Christian can live with certainty. Not certainty in himself, but certainty in Christ. Therefore, we stand before God today as Abraham stands before Him now in the Kingdom of Heaven: justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Empty-handed, yes, but no longer condemned. And the best part of it all is that those empty hands of faith are precisely the hands Christ delights to fill with his never-ending love and unchanging grace.

Amen.

Pastor Lucas Abbott