

“Saved by Grace Through Faith”

March 1, 2026

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Romans 4: 1-5,13-17

I've said it before and I'm sure I will say it again, Jesus changed everything. Today we are exploring how Jesus changed the very make-up of the people of God. Jesus was Jewish and came as the Jewish Messiah. And through His teaching and resurrection, an incredible number of Jews recognized Jesus as the anointed one of God and followed Him. They added Jesus to their Jewish identity and became known as Jewish Christians. They still followed Jewish law as passed down from Moses through the prophets and continued as part of God's chosen people. Jesus came as a Jew to confirm the Jewish people as God's people and bring them the gift of life after death, resurrection.

At the same time, non-Jewish people recognized God in Jesus. They had no history in the temple or with following Jewish law, but they found new life in Jesus. Jesus critiqued, stretched and even broke some of the Jewish law and went outside the physical boundaries to the Jewish people to bring healing, food multiplication, miracles and the teachings of life. The people He touched became known as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ.

Having practicing Jews and non-Jews both become followers of Jesus meant the early church leadership had to make some hard decisions. Was Christianity to be a subsection under Judaism, or was it to be its own thing? In other words, did people have to become Jewish in order to be Christian? Well, the Jewish leadership answered that one for them. In many areas, a person was kicked out of the synagogue for claiming Jesus. Followers of Jesus were not welcome in Judaism, which meant Christianity would have to stand on its own. But there were still more questions. Since it came out of Judaism, would Christianity still follow Jewish law? Would it claim the Hebrew Scriptures, or what we call the Old Testament? What would define this new religion/movement? How could people who used to worship in the temple of God and people who used to worship fertility gods and people who used to worship the emperor find enough common ground to come together? Paul shares some really good insights in Romans 4.

Paul starts with his own heritage as a lifelong Jew. He says let's go back to the beginning, to our founder, to Abraham, the father of faith. His story starts with God choosing Abraham. We have no explanation of why God chose Abraham and Sarah to be the founders of the people of God. There is no evidence of them being exceptionally righteous or kind or from some noble birth line. We don't know why God chose Abraham, but God did. Somehow, Abraham found favor with God. Which, by the way, is the definition of grace: unmerited favor. Abraham found favor with God, not because Abraham earned it or deserved it or even applied for it, but simple because God chose him. Now the deal was, if Abraham would follow God's ways, God would

bless him with land, wealth, influence and descendants. Along the way, both Abraham and God did pretty well. Abraham generally went where God told him to go and did what God told him to do, and God generally brought the blessings as promised. But neither was perfect. Twice Abraham pretended Sarah was his sister as opposed to his wife so people would treat him well. Not exactly trusting God to take care of them. For His part, God did bless Abraham and Sarah with wealth, land and influence, but they were getting really old and still had no children – no descendants. It was during one of those tense conversations with God that Abraham called God on this yet unfulfilled promise, reminding God of the promise of descendants and that they were getting to the end of their childbearing years. God responded by renewing the promise, not showing any progress, just renewing the promise, which is followed by the line Paul quotes in our reading, v. 3, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Another translation would be “Abraham believed God, and God saw him as worthy.” Believing God can and will do what God has promised is a pretty good definition of faith. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Abraham believed God could and would do what God promised – in this case, a baby.

Paul is inviting his fellow Jewish Christians to see that before there was the law of Moses, before there was circumcision or dietary laws or Sabbath rest, there was Abraham, the father of faith, their ancestor in the faith; who was made worthy of God by faith through grace. God chose him even though he had done nothing to deserve it – grace; and God saw him as worthy, simply because he believed God, not just with his mouth and mind, but with his life - faith. Paul invites his fellow Jewish Christians to see their point of entry into God’s family was by grace through faith, which is the exact same way these people with no Jewish background are entering into God’s family, by faith through grace. Common ground for Jewish Christians and Christians in the 1st century and with us today. Through Jesus, God has chosen them, God has chosen us, not because we are exceptionally righteous or kind or from some noble birth line; but because we found favor with God – grace. And just like Abraham and the 1st century followers of Jesus, we are made righteous not by obeying certain laws or jumping through different hoops, but because we believe that in Jesus, God can do what God has promised. God can bring life out of death. God can bring resurrection. And through believing, not just with our mouth and mind, but with our life – with faith – we are made worthy. We, like Abraham, are saved by grace through faith.

That is the incredible insight Paul shares in Romans. An insight picked-up on during the reformation which birthed all the churches in Rochester except Saint Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church – saved by grace through faith. We are not worthy of God and cannot do anything to make ourselves worthy of God. God extends the unmerited favor known as grace, and we respond by sending our lives to God as a living thank you note. It is true, from the outside, being a living thank you note and pretending to earn our way to God look the same. But not on

the inside. Responding to grace is a life of gratitude. Trying to earn your way is enslaving obligation.

But what I want us to focus on for a moment is grace. People, okay not people, me, I am strange when it comes to grace – that unmerited favor, that benefit of the doubt, that acceptance before doing anything acceptable. On the one hand, I am big on grace for me while desiring justice for you. As in, when I am late for work, there is a reason and you simply need to cut me some slack, some grace. I had a flat tire, or the alarm didn't go off, or I was just too exhausted and I wouldn't have been good for anything if I had been here. Mental health concerns are real and need to be recognized. I just need a little grace. But if I come to a store that is supposed to be open and it isn't because they are late for work, that is inexcusable. You need to think ahead and plan for these things. I get it, you are pregnant and not only is morning sickness real, but the fact that the outfit you laid out to wear doesn't fit is also real. I get it, but this is not the first time you have had this. You should have made adjustments, like trying on your outfit the night before and getting up earlier to compensate for morning sickness time, so you could get here on time. Grace for me, justice for you. On the other hand, I am big on justice for me, and grace for you. I am happy to support community dinner and our blessing box because sometimes people just need a little help. But not me. I would not eat for two days rather than ask someone for food. I'm happy to help shovel your driveway, but I can take care of my own. I am happy to help carry your burdens, but I will carry my own weight, thank you. I'm big on grace for you, because you need it; but not for me, I earn what I get. I can do it myself. Did I mention people, I mean I, am really funny when it comes to grace. Happy to give you a gift but I need to earn mine, unless I really need it, then it is not grace because I have a reason. In case you are looking for the word that is getting in the way, it is pride. It is good to have pride in your work, take pride in your appearance, to put your best foot forward, take pride in your accomplishments, your school, and your family; but we can't let it taint reality. We may be doing okay in comparison to other people, but we are not worthy of the creator, redeemer and sustainer of the universe. We only get an audience with God by invitation – by grace. Jesus is the invitation. Jesus is God's grace. Unmerited favor, and it comes to little Cash Melton and his parents, it comes to the Enyarts in the hospital, it comes to you in the pew, it comes to me in the pulpit. Grace is not about who we are. It is about who God is.

Matthew West currently has a song playing that helps us grasp how grace works. The first verse says,

I used to think grace was a ladder
Every sinner had to climb
If only I could just do better
I could earn it over time
Tried to work my way to good
Trouble is, I never could

But then You showed me
Just exactly how grace works
Then the chorus says,
I'm good at always falling down
You're good at never giving up
I'm good at getting turned around
You're good at saying I'm still loved
And I was wrecked by mercy
The day I understood
I'm not loved because I'm worthy
I'm loved because You're good

Grace is the reason you and I are okay, acceptable, even loved. Grace is what makes us worthy of resurrection, of new life, of eternal life with God when this life is through. Yes, we need to respond in faith to fully activate that grace – not just believing with our heads, but with our beings. We will talk more about that another day. But it starts with grace. It starts with who God is. You're not loved because you're worthy, you're loved because God's good. God grants you that unmerited favor. Our only question is, how can I say thank you.

Mike Van Heyningen