

"Rules & Promises"

Romans 4:1-8, 13-17

March 16, 2014

2nd Sunday in Lent

Rules and promises....promises and rules. Which are the best by which to run your lives and base your hope for the future? Is it rules and your obedience to them? Is it promises and your belief in them? One choice seems to be more trustworthy and dependable. One choice seems shakier and less dependable. But which is which?

Rules seem to be the safer choice. You know exactly what is required of you with rules. You also know what you can expect if you obey the rules. You can use your obedience to them to measure your progress against the standard of the rules. Are you getting nearer to enjoying the reward for obedience or not? You can also use your obedience to measure your progress against other people. Are you better than some? Worse than others? You know exactly where you stand with a solid standard like rules.

Rules and obedience are the basis for reward in our society. You reap great reward if you follow the rules at school, in sports, at your job, and many other places. If you follow the rules, good things will happen to you. If you disobey the rules, bad things will happen to you. You can be very sure of things with rules because you are in control.

Promises, on the other hand, seem to be less sure. So much is out of your hands when it comes to promises. A lot depends on the reliability of the one making the promise. If the promiser is trustworthy, then maybe the promise is, too. But how do we know if we can trust the one making the promise? It used to be that someone could make a promise to another person; the two would shake hands on the promise; and everything was fine. But that seems positively naïve these days. We only feel safe if we draw up a contract and sign it, thus employing more rules.

A lot also depends on the believability of what is being promised. We have been taught from an early age, "If something is too good to be true, it probably is." So we don't believe outlandish

promises like sweepstakes mail that says, “You may have just won \$10,000,000.” Or, we don’t believe the emails from Nigerian royalty that promises to let us keep 10% of the \$50,000,000 that they are smuggling out of the country if we just give them our bank account number for them to put the money in. In that case, we don’t believe the promiser OR the promise. Trusting a promise is difficult because it means we are not control.

We bring this concept of “rules vs. promises” into our spiritual lives as well. Although we say we don’t like rules, I think we secretly like them in our spiritual lives. We want to be able to measure our spiritual progress. How do we do that? We compare our lives against the Ten Commandments. We are always trying to do a better job of being good by obeying the rules.

We also like to compare ourselves with other people. “Am I living a better life than my non-Christian neighbor?” To determine that, we look at how well we are obeying the rules. We are certainly more righteous than non-believers because of the good lives we lead. ‘Am I more spiritual than other Christians (either outside my denomination or within my congregation?’ We look at how well we are obeying the “religious” rules – how often am I in church, how much money I give, do I just go to church or do I go to Bible Class, too, and so on. We may feel closer to God than some, but farther away from God than others.

Obedience to rules can be the standard for many people in determining their relationship with God. When you ask people if they are going to heaven, many will say, “I’ve tried to lead a good life,” or “I’m no worse than anyone else,” or “I’ve been confirmed and I’m on the membership roles of Peace Lutheran Church.” In other words, I’ve followed the rules and, in some cases, better than others have.

However, rules (even religious rules) and our obedience to them get us nowhere. The only true God is a holy and righteous God Who requires His creatures to be perfect as well. There is no exception and there is no grading on the curve. If you sin – that is, break the rules - even just once in your entire life, you are not good enough for God, even if you live perfectly the rest of the way. Who

among us would ever attempt to make the claim that we've only sinned once? Each of us daily sins much, not only in our evil deeds, but in our thoughts and words, as well. Even our best attempts at obeying the Law of God are not nearly good enough. Compared to God's holiness, Isaiah the prophet says, "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." (IS. 64:6). We don't earn anything good for ourselves by being good and obeying the rules. The Scripture says, "The wages of sin is death."

In our text for today, Paul uses Abraham as an example. Most Jews and not a few Christians would think that Abraham got His relationship with God and earned his blessings by being good. Abraham obeyed everything God told him to do and then God blessed him, right? Not at all.

Now, from all accounts, Abram was a good man. Paul says that, because of his goodness, Abram had reason to boast, but not before God. Abram's entire relationship with God was based on a promise. We read about that promise in our Old Testament lesson today. Abram was a 75 year old idol worshiper from Ur of Chaldees. God called him and promised to give him land and many descendants and to bless all the nations of the earth through one of those descendants. Abraham would get all of this, not by obeying all the rules, but through faith. Paul says, "For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be the heir of the world did not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith."

Abraham first of all trusted the One who made the promise. Paul says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Note that it does not say that Abraham "believed in God" is some sort of generic way like many people do. Abraham believed God, that is, He believed that God can do what God says He can do. For that, God counted Abraham as being right with Him

Secondly, Abram believed the content of the promise, as wild and unbelievable as it seemed. He was 75 years old with no children and a barren wife in a distant country. Yet he packs up his stuff, leaves his home and family, and heads off for this Promised Land and the other things contained within that promise. He believed God would give him children He did not yet have, land

which He did not yet occupy, and a Savior who was not yet born. Obedience to God does not make Abraham right with God. Faith did that. But obedience to God will always follow faith.

We, too, are people who cannot hope to attain to a right standing with God and receive His blessings by the law and our obedience to it. We, like Abraham, are people who live on the basis of promise. God's promise to us is essentially the same as the promise to Abraham: the true Promised Land – heaven and the Descendant who would come to bless us, rescue us, and bring us to that Promised Land.

You and I, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God and the water of Holy Baptism believe God and God considers us to be holy and right in His sight because of that belief and not because of any good thing that we have done. We don't just "believe IN God", that is, that He exists. We believe, like Abraham, that God can do what God says He can do. God is faithful. From the time of Adam and Eve, through the time of Abraham, and to our time, God has never broken a promise. And God only promises good to His people who believe Him.

You and I, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God and the water of Holy Baptism believe the content of God's promise, too, no matter how wild and unbelievable they might be. God promised to send His Son, Jesus Christ, to earn righteousness for us by His obedience to the Law in place of our failed attempts to obey. He did that. God promised that Jesus would earn the forgiveness for our sins by His suffering and death on the cross so that we would not have to stand under the wrath of God and receive His punishment which we so richly deserve. He did that. God promised that Jesus, having beaten and crucified to death, would rise from the tomb to a strong and victorious life so that we, too, may live a new life. He did that. God promised to send Jesus back to judge the world, destroy the evil around us, and bring us to the culmination of that new life with Him for all eternity. He will do that.

We are a lot like Abraham. He believed in future blessings which God would give him – blessings he could not see and for which He had no proof. We believe in the past blessings which

God has given us. We have not seen Jesus physically nor witnessed all that He has done for our salvation. We have no proof, yet we believe.

We also believe in future blessings which God will give us when Jesus returns – blessing which we cannot yet see and for which we have no proof. Yet we believe.

God kept His promise to Abraham. God gave Him the land. God gave Him many descendants. And God sent *the* Descendant, Jesus Christ, through Whom we and all the nations of the world have been blessed. So I urge you and myself to continue believing in the past promises of God and the future promises of God. God has kept and will continue to keep His promises, not because you've worked hard to obey, but because of His grace, His unmerited love for us in Christ Jesus. To complete the verse partially quoted earlier, "For the wages of sin is death....but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

Live your lives on the basis of that promise and because of your faith, as Abraham did when he cut ties with home and family, began traveling to an unknown destination, and trusted in unseen and unproven promises. Remember: obedience to God does not make you right with God. Faith did that. But obedience to God will always follow faith.

Rules and promises....promises and rules. Which are the best by which to run your lives and base your hope for the future? Trying to make it with God on the basis of His Law and our obedience to it always fails. Our text says, "For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath." It is the way of promise and our faith in it. As our text says, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law [i.e. the Jew] but also to the one [i.e. us] who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all." Rules and promises....promises and rules? Most definitely, promises rule! Amen.