

Family Resemblance

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Unashamed - A Study of Romans

God's family is not defined by outward rites or religious résumés; it is marked by faith.

Abraham was declared righteous before he ever received the covenant sign, and his true children — Jew and Gentile alike — are known by that same believing trust.

Introduction

- I think one of the most interesting things about a new baby is the inevitable question - “Who does he look like?”
 - It starts almost immediately.
 - The baby has barely arrived.
 - And already, everybody is studying that little face, looking for a family resemblance.
 - “Well, if you look at her this way, she looks like her momma.”
 - “No, look at his eyes. Those are definitely his daddy’s eyes.”
 - “She has her grandmother’s nose.”
 - “He’s got his grandfather’s hair.”
 - “If you hold him this way, he looks like his daddy.”
 - “If you hold him by his right leg, upside down, under a fluorescent light, he really does look like his momma.”
 - My personal favorite — “I don’t know...I think she’s a perfect blend of them both.”
 - That is usually what we say when we have absolutely no idea.
 - I’m going to be honest: unless the baby looks like a clone of one of the parents, I struggle to see it.

- Everybody else is pointing out the eyes, the ears, and the shape of the baby's face, and I'm standing there thinking, "It looks like a baby."
 - But we love looking for that family resemblance
- As they grow, we begin to notice more than physical similarities.
 - We start noticing the way they move, the way they speak, and the expressions they make.
 - "That was exactly the face your mother makes."
 - "You laugh just like your dad."
 - Sometimes children inherit interests from their parents.
 - Sometimes they share the same sense of humor.
 - Sometimes they have the same habits, mannerisms, temperament, or stubborn streak.
- And sometimes the resemblance shows up at the worst possible moment.
 - You hear your child say something and suddenly realize, "That sounded exactly like me."
 - Sometimes that makes you proud.
 - Other times it makes you want to apologize to everyone you have ever met.
- Families tend to resemble one another.
 - Sometimes the resemblance is physical.
 - Sometimes it is found in personality.
 - Sometimes it appears in the things a family values and the way its members live.
 - I suspect people have been asking about family resemblance for a very long time.

- I bet even Adam and Eve looked at Abel and said, “How’d that happen? Oh, and he kind of looks like you!”
- But family resemblance is about more than appearance.
 - Resemblance helps us answer a deeper question: “Who belongs to whom?”
 - That is the question beneath our passage today.
 - Who belongs in Abraham’s family?
 - Who may rightfully call Abraham their father?
 - And what does a true child of Abraham actually look like?
- Those were not abstract questions in Paul’s day.
 - They went right to the center of a person’s identity and standing before God.
 - For the Jewish people, Abraham was not merely an important figure from the past.
 - He was the patriarch—the father of their nation and the man to whom God had given his covenant promises.
- To be physically descended from Abraham was a great privilege.
 - To bear the sign of circumcision was to possess the visible mark of belonging to the covenant people.
 - So if anyone had been asked, “Who are Abraham’s children?” the obvious answer would have been, “The people descended from Abraham who bear the covenant sign given to Abraham.”
- But in [Romans 4](#), Paul does something surprising.
 - He takes the family album off the shelf, points to Abraham, and asks us to look more carefully.
 - Last week, Paul called our attention back to this man we often call “the father of our faith.”

- You can go back and read his story beginning in [Genesis 12](#).
- God called Abraham to leave his country and his relatives and to go to a land God would show him.
- God promised to make a great nation from him. He promised Abraham descendants, a land, and a blessing that would ultimately extend to all the families of the earth.
- There was one very obvious problem: Abraham and Sarah had no children.
- Humanly speaking, God's promise appeared impossible.
 - Abraham could not produce the promised future through his own strength.
 - He could not look at his circumstances and find any natural reason for confidence.
 - All he had was the promise of God.
 - Then, in [Genesis 15](#), God brought Abraham outside and told him to look toward heaven and number the stars, if he could number them.
 - God said, "So shall your offspring be."
 - And then we read this crucial statement in v. 6:
Genesis 15:6 ESV
⁶ And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.
- That sentence stands at the center of Paul's argument in [Romans 4](#).
 - There is no denying that Abraham became a man whose faith produced meaningful acts of obedience.
 - When God called, Abraham went.
 - When God commanded, Abraham obeyed.
 - His faith was not empty or inactive.

- But Abraham was not counted righteous because he had accumulated enough good works.
 - He did not earn a righteous standing before God through his performance.
 - God counted him righteous through faith.
- That is where Paul has brought us so far.
 - But the mention of Abraham raises an important question.
 - Abraham was not merely an example of faith. He was the patriarch of Israel.
 - God had made a covenant with him, and his descendants bore a physical sign identifying them as God's covenant people.
- So, if Abraham is the father of God's people, who exactly belongs to his family?
 - Is this family defined by physical ancestry?
 - Is it identified by an outward religious sign?
- Or is there another kind of resemblance that reveals the true children of Abraham?
 - As Paul continues his argument, he is going to ask us to take a closer look at the family portrait.
 - And as we do, we may discover that Abraham's family is both more inclusive—and more exclusive—than anyone expected.
- Let's turn our attention to this morning's passage from [Romans 4:9–12](#).

Scripture Reading

Romans 4:9–12 ESV

⁹ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.

¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well,

¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

- As we know, this opening section of Romans has been doing some heavy lifting.
 - Paul has built a legal case against the whole world.
 - None of us have anything to bring that might gain us a standing before God.
 - We all fall short of God's standard.
 - But Paul brings his case to a close at the end of chapter 3 by showing us that we can still be justified - remember, being justified is the legal declaration that we are in a right standing before God.
 - But we aren't justified by anything that we do, but by faith in what Christ has already done.
- To further cement this argument, Paul calls us to remember to heroes from the Old Testament: Abraham and David.
 - Abraham showed us that righteousness is counted to the one who believes, apart from works.
 - David described the blessedness of the person whose lawless deeds are forgiven, whose sins are covered, and against whom the Lord will not count sin.

- Paul gathers all of that grace into one phrase at the beginning of verse 9: **“this blessing.”**
 - It is the blessing of being counted righteous rather than having our sins counted against us.
 - It is the blessing of forgiveness—of standing before God with nothing left to prove and no debt left to pay.
- But Paul’s argument now moves in a new direction.
 - He has explained how this blessing is received.
 - Now he asks how far it reaches.
 - Is this blessing reserved for those who possess Israel’s covenant sign, or can it extend beyond them?
- Paul answers that question by returning once more to Abraham and examining the order in which the events of his life took place.
 - And it turns out that there might just be some family resemblance here that reaches beyond, far beyond, Abraham’s ethnic family.
 - That brings us to our first point:

The Family’s Blessing is Received by Faith (vv. 9-10)

- I’ve spoken of my mentor many times.
 - Bob and Ruth were two of the godliest people I’ve ever known.
 - They loved the Lord and they labored to raise their kids to do likewise.
 - They had three children - they had a son and a daughter biologically, but their youngest daughter became part of the family through adoption.
 - They decided early on that they would be completely honest and transparent about her adoption - but that often resulted in some arguments between her and her brother.

- He would sometimes throw shade her way and make some snide remark about her being adopted.
- She learned early on how to get him to shut up. She would reply: “I may be adopted, but that just means Mom and Dad CHOSE me. They didn’t have a choice with you.”
- She loved being a part of her family...even if she didn’t get there the same way her siblings did.
- She was blessed to be raised in a home where Christ was honored as LORD.
- She didn’t look like her family - but there was still a very strong family resemblance in terms of her commitment to Christ.
- In v. 9, Paul raises a very important question.
 - Who exactly is part of this family?
 - Do the blessings of justification only belong to Abraham’s descendants or is the family much larger than that?
 - To answer the question, Paul turns to the order of events in Abraham’s life.
 - And the answer is as straightforward as possible.
- We’ve talked about the significance of [Gen. 15:6](#)
 - That is the moment when Abraham trusted in God’s plan and when righteousness was credited to his account.
 - That was the moment when Abraham’s legal case was settled.
 - And all of that took place BEFORE any kind of particular religious identification.
- It isn’t until [Genesis 17](#) that Abraham is given the sign of the covenant that would forever identify his ethnic family.
 - But there is some serious time that passes between [Genesis 15](#) and [Genesis 16](#).

- It's hard for us to know with certainty how old Abraham was in ch. 15, but chapter 16 says he was 86 years old when Ishmael was born.
- And chapter 17 says he was 99 years old when he was given the sign of the covenant.
- Jewish tradition holds that Abraham was 70 years old in chapter 15.
- This means that Abraham was a justified Gentile for at least 13 years, perhaps as long as 29 years, before he was given any kind of outward sign of the covenant.
- This is important - it means that the blessing of justification isn't just for Jews.
 - It is available to everyone who believes.
 - The family tree is, by God's good design, MUCH larger than Abraham's ethnic descendants.
- But this isn't only about Jew and Gentile.
 - This is yet another reminder that the blessing of salvation, the gift of justification, isn't something that is inherited.
 - That's a remarkable gift if you were raised in a home where Christ wasn't at the center.
 - You are not destined to follow in the faithless footsteps of your parents.
 - Every generation has to decide if they're going to follow Christ or not.
 - You might see patterns and behaviors that you inherited from your family - but your commitment to Christ is yours and yours alone.
 - That's also a cautionary tale some of you should be mindful of as well.
 - If you're counting on your Christian upbringing to give you some kind of merit - don't.

- Because you don't inherit righteousness.
- It isn't something that is passed down through the bloodline.
- Every generation has to choose if it is going to follow Christ, irrespective of the choices of the previous generation.
- Some of you need to take a really hard look at your relationship with Christ.
 - Are you riding the coattails of your parents believing that it counts for something?
 - Are you allowing the sinful patterns of your parents to dictate how you serve Christ today?
- Abraham is our example - he didn't become righteous by joining the right tribe or starting the right religion.
 - Abraham became righteous by a gracious act of God because Abraham trusted in God's promises.
 - That is the same way that every one of us is saved today.
 - Not by our works, not by our heritage, not by any ethnic or cultural connection.
 - But by faith in the Good News of Jesus Christ that we call the Gospel.
- But that does raise an interesting question — if we are made part of the family through faith, what is it that identifies us as part of the family?

The Family Sign Confirms Faith (v. 11a)

- Beginning sometime around the twelfth century, families in medieval Europe began to be identified by distinctive colors and symbols displayed on shields, banners, and armor.
 - We commonly refer to these designs as “family crests.”
 - This started out as very practical - these crests or “coats of arms” helped identify knights.

- Over time, coats of arms became associated with family lines.
- They were passed down through descendants and came to represent a family's identity, history, and heritage.
- If you bore the family's arms, you were publicly identifying yourself as someone who belonged to that family.
- In verse 11, Paul turns our attention to the family sign given to Abraham.
 - Circumcision was the visible sign that identified Abraham and his physical descendants as members of God's covenant people.
 - But Paul is very precise about the relationship between Abraham's sign and Abraham's righteousness.
 - Notice the order of the words: circumcision was a sign and a seal **of the righteousness that he had by faith**.
 - It was not the cause of his righteousness — It was the confirmation of it.
 - The family sign did not create Abraham's faith or make him righteous.
 - It pointed to and confirmed what God had already done.
- That distinction is essential.
 - A sign points beyond itself to something else.
 - The sign has meaning because of the reality to which it points.
 - A majority of the people in the room today have a sign like this on them in this moment.
 - A wedding ring is a sign of a marriage, but putting on a wedding ring does not create a marriage.
 - A diploma is evidence that a degree has been earned, but hanging a diploma on the wall does not give someone an education.
- This was true for Abraham as well —the sign mattered—but it could never replace the reality it represented.

- No outward sign or religious act could have created Abraham's standing before God.
- Instead the sign Abraham was given confirmed and marked what God had already given him.
- This is important for us today because the Christian faith does have outward signs.
 - And those signs are absolutely important.
 - But those signs do not bring about right standing before God.
- We are very fortunate as a church that we have a vibrant NextGen Ministry.
 - And any time a church has a vibrant ministry to children and teens, you're going to see baptisms, just like we did today.
 - Baptisms are exciting — and they're kind of contagious.
 - I can't tell you the number of spiritual conversations I've had with kids that always begin with "I want to get baptized."
 - That's a good impulse — but it is also an impulse that needs to get brake-checked.
 - One of the hardest things for a kid to overcome is to separate baptism from justification.
 - They wouldn't word it that way...but that's what's going on.
 - So many children associate baptism with justification.
 - But that's not what happens in the water.
 - Justification happens just like it did with Abraham — it happens when we trust the Good News of the Gospel.
 - Then and ONLY then do we enter into the water of baptism as an outward demonstration of the saving faith we've experienced on the inside.

- I love baptisms — but I only love baptisms when the one being baptized is justified.
 - Parents, please don't prematurely push your kids in the water without confidence that they understand the Gospel and have trusted in what God has done for us in the Gospel.
 - Because I'll tell you what is going to happen if you push them in the water too soon.
 - 1...they're going to come to Jacob in a few years and say, "I didn't know what I was doing. I wasn't saved. Can I do this again?"
 - 2...they're going to ride that baptism into adulthood and they're going to hold onto that baptism like it is where their sins were washed away and they will not know the blessing of being justified by faith.
- Baptism is a gift and a treasure, but only if it demonstrates saving faith because in and of itself, it cannot produce righteousness.
- So Paul has told us how we become part of this family - by faith.
 - We have learned about the importance of those outward signs that confirm the inward reality.
 - Which leaves only one thing - what exactly does it look like to be part of Abraham's family?
 - What is the family resemblance for us?

The Family Resemblance is a Life of Faith (vv. 11b-12)

- Paul identifies Abraham as the father of two groups:
 - Gentiles who believe.
 - Jews who do more than possess the sign—they "walk in the footsteps" of Abraham's faith.
- Both groups belong to the same family in the same way: through faith.

- The true children of Abraham are not identified merely by what is in their ancestry or what has happened to their bodies.
- They bear the family resemblance by sharing Abraham's faith.
- We've been talking a lot about something that happens early in our Christian life.
 - Justification is step 1.
 - And it is only step 1 — once we are justified, we don't get rejustified.
 - We don't revisit that step again because of future sin and mistakes.
 - Once our legal standing is truly changed, that status doesn't get revoked.
 - But invariably, we will always have someone in mind whose faith journey seems to be some kind of exception.
- Let's establish the rule before we explain the exception.
 - Our legal analogies do have shortfalls.
 - That's because our human courts always come up short.
 - Human courts can declare someone "not guilty."
 - But that is not justification.
 - We don't have perfect legal analogy for justification.
 - Justification is unique because in Christ, God declares the sinner righteous AND imparts a new nature through the Holy Spirit.
 - There is more going on in your soul than just a legal declaration.
 - Consider how the Scriptures frame this...
- For example - [2 Cor. 5:17](#) says...

2 Corinthians 5:17 ESV

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

John 3:3 ESV

³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Ephesians 4:22–24 ESV

²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,

²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,

²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

- Not only that, if we are truly justified, God also gives us the Holy Spirit, who seals us and assures us that we belong to him.

Ephesians 1:13 ESV

¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

- All of that to say that saving faith produces a change in our affections.
 - It doesn't mean perfection, but it does mean our desire is to live out of the righteousness we've been given.
 - In [Romans 4:12](#), Paul says that we walk in the footsteps of Abraham.
 - Not that that walk justifies us, but “the footsteps of Abraham” becomes the path we walk out of our commitment to Christ.
 - And that walk is what becomes our family resemblance.
- And that's a beautiful picture.
 - People from every nation, tribe, tongue - across time and space, all sharing this same family resemblance as they seek to honor Christ by their faithful obedience to him.
 - Not in an effort to earn any kind of spiritual favor, but out of a heartfelt eagerness to show their love to God and their love for one another.

- That becomes the mark, the family crest, so to speak.
- Which means something for those who have turned their back on Christ or who claim to be part of the family yet do not walk in the footsteps of faith.
 - It means that they weren't really justified to begin with.
 - Just to be clear, a season of struggle, doubt, or even serious sin does not necessarily mean that someone was never justified.
 - Abraham's own walk was far from flawless.
 - But a settled rejection of Christ or persistent indifference to the things of God reveals that whatever profession may have been made, the faith of Abraham was never truly present.
- There are a legion of reasons why that may be true.
 - Maybe their trust is in the sign and not the savior.
 - That childhood baptism is their salvation but it can never do that.
 - Maybe their trust is in a prayer they prayed when they were young.
 - Prayer is a beautiful way to express one's faith — to "confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord..." — but you'll never be able to pray hard enough to be justified.
 - Maybe their trust is in their upbringing or their family.
 - They went to church when they were a kid. Family prayed before meals. But you don't become part of the family because your family was part of the family.
- If our trust is in any lesser thing than Jesus, then we have never be born again.
 - We were never made a new creation.
 - We were never sealed with the Holy Spirit.
 - Which means we were never part of the family.

- But it's still not too late.

Invitation

- We've spent this morning looking at a family portrait.
 - And I've asked you to look closely — not just at the picture, but at yourself.
 - Do you bear the family resemblance?
 - Not the resemblance of a sign.
 - Not the resemblance of a prayer you prayed once and have coasted on ever since.
 - Not the resemblance of parents who loved Jesus, as if their faith could be inherited like the shape of your nose or the sound of your laugh.
 - The real family resemblance is faith — the same faith Abraham had, credited to him as righteousness, before any sign was ever placed on his body.
- Some of you have been trusting the sign instead of the Savior.
 - You were baptized.
 - You remember the day, maybe even the water.
 - But you've never actually turned from your sin and trusted Christ — the water was just water.
- Some of you have been trusting a moment instead of a Master.
 - You said a prayer.
 - Maybe as a kid, maybe in a service just like this one.
 - But that prayer isn't what saves — it was only ever meant to be the sound faith makes when it turns toward Jesus.
 - If nothing turned, the words didn't do what you think they did.

- And some of you have been trusting a family instead of a Father.
 - You grew up in a home like this one.
 - Church on Sundays.
 - Prayer before supper.
 - A Bible somewhere in the house.
 - And you've quietly assumed that's enough — that you belong to this family because your family did. You don't.
 - Belonging isn't inherited. It's believed.
- So here is what it means to actually bear the resemblance this morning:
 - It means admitting that whatever you've been resting on — the sign, the prayer, the upbringing — was never enough to save you, and it never will be.
 - It means turning from trusting yourself, your record, your religious history, and turning instead to Christ alone.
 - It means trusting God's promise as Abraham did—coming with nothing of your own to stand on and relying entirely upon what God has accomplished through Jesus Christ.
- If that's you this morning — if you've never actually done that, if you've been living off a sign or a memory or a family name instead of a living faith — I want to invite you to come to Jesus - for real.
 - Not to earn a place in the family. You can't. Abraham couldn't either.
 - Just to believe. And let God do what only God can do — count it to you as righteousness, and make you, for the first time, a true child of the promise, a true member of the family.