

Lent 2—A  
**Romans 4:1-5,13-17**  
The Guarantee

Do you enjoy listening to blues music? A favorite blues singer is the legendary Mississippi and Chicago singer Muddy Waters. One of his songs is called “Long Distance Call.” Here’s a few of the words. He said: “Telephone’s ringing, sounds like a long distance call. The party on the other side said, ‘Muddy, there’s another mule kicking in your stall.’” And that line always got a big laugh, kind of a rueful laugh, because obviously somebody’s cheating on him. His wife was cheating on him, or his girl was cheating on him with somebody else. Muddy himself had lived a wild life. He had many, many children by many different women. That was a life he knew very well, the life where relationships weren’t permanent and were easily broken, where a lot of lying, cheating, and dishonesty made for a lot of broken relationships. But that’s what made his music so compelling, it appealed to so many of his listeners who also suffered from broken relationships.

Or consider for instance the great guitarist in the ‘60s, Jimi Hendrix, who had a very famous song called “Red House.” “There’s a red house over yonder, that’s where my baby stayed.” And then the second line says: “Wait a minute, wait a minute, something’s wrong here. My key don’t fit the door” and his baby wasn’t there anymore. She took off on him and didn’t even tell him and he came home and somebody else was living in his house. There’s pain all over the place because of broken relationships and we read and hear about these things and they resonate with us but they don’t make it any better.

If you watch afternoon television, for instance, the soaps are all about cheating and people betraying one another and ending up alone. Then after the soaps come the courtroom shows. And these shows aren’t all about a high-level legal drama. They’re about divorce and they’re about people hating and arguing and screaming at each other as they’re trying to divvy up the loot of who gets what, and people accusing each other and defending their behavior. It’s all about lying, and cheating and the sad thing is it’s about broken relationships. And people who have been in broken relationships, people who have been lied to, cheated on or betrayed watch these shows to try and find some meaning and some solace for themselves. But God can do so much better and that’s what I want to talk to you about today.

There’s a sort of a dopey little ritual that people have been doing for generations where they get a flower and they’ll try and figure out if someone they care about really loves them or not. And they’re not sure so they’ll go: “She loves me, she loves me not. She loves me, she loves me not. She loves me,” and then you’re down to one last petal and you’re ready for the bad news. “I guess she loves me not.”

Wouldn’t it be sad if that’s the way you had to look at your relationship with your God? What does God think of you? Does he like you or do you have to play the flower game, never really knowing? What games do you play in your head to find some kind of comfort that your God isn’t going to leave you hanging? That there isn’t some other mule in your stall in heaven or that when you get to heaven, your key isn’t going to fit the door and you’ll be turned away, yet again. How do you know?

People make up games in their own head. St. Paul actually praised the people in Athens because they were so eager for the approval of the gods that they built shrines, statues and altars to every last one they could think of in the collection — it’s called the Pantheon — the collection of all the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses up on Mount Olympus. And they even had a miscellaneous altar to the

“unknown god” in case they missed one. That, of course, was Paul’s opening to say, “That’s the one, the one you’re missing, that’s the real one.”

As St. Paul was writing to the Romans, in a minute we’ll dig into his letter to the Romans, God had given a constitution of behavioral expectations to the Jewish people that he had cultivated and nurtured as a nation. He gave them this book of laws for two main purposes. One was to help them realize how sinful they were and in need of his forgiveness and rescue. And the other reason was to set them apart and put a fence around them to give them a unique identity, a brand as it were, so they wouldn’t be absorbed by the nations around them. He wanted them to be different. And so, he set up food rules and all kinds of rules of social conduct, even rules about mandatory circumcision, for instance, to set them apart and make them aware, “We’re different, we’re different. We have a job to do.”

Unfortunately, when given lists of religious rules, what do you think over the years the people started to do with a list of rules? They made that into the game you had to play in order to answer that aching question about God: “He loves me, he loves me not?” “If I try really, really, really hard to obey the rules, then he’ll like me.” But Paul, from personal and painful experience, pointed out to the Christians in Rome, especially those who had come from the nation of Israel, that all those rules and laws did was make you even more guilty because it gave you even more opportunities to mess up. Our problem is we’re all broken, we’re all corrupted. It’s like trying to heal ourselves of cancer by willing it away. It just doesn’t work like that, does it?

Let’s dig into Romans 4. The book of Romans is sometimes feared and avoided by Christians because it’s the most doctrinal of all of the books of the New Testament; some seriously heavy lifting, great deep thoughts. It’s very tightly packed together, one major idea after another. There are no real stories in here, this is teaching. It’s not like the messages, the sermons of the prophets in the Old Testament. It’s not a drama like Job, it’s not songs like the Psalms, it’s not a musical libretto like the Song of Solomon. It’s not biography like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, or a history of the church like the book of Acts. This is tightly packed teaching and it’s kind of heavy going and sometimes complicated so often people will skip this stuff. But we shouldn’t skip it because the book of Romans has probably the most matchless, beautiful, clear, powerful explanation of what the Christian faith is all about. You just can’t miss it. If you just give it a chance and pay attention to it, God will explain how you and he can be together forever.

Chapter 4 is the Abraham chapter. Someone that God had chosen, along with his wife, to be the founders of a nation that would stay faithful and loyal to him and be the vessels, the DNA vessels, the blood vessels, to give the world a Savior. Abraham didn’t know it at the time, but it was going to be 2000 years before God kept that promise. But in the meantime, he built a blood group of people. It was not his intent that they alone would be saved, but that at least somebody would be saved because the world in which Abraham lived, the true faith was just dying out. The families were failing to transmit their faith and God lavished attention on Abraham and his wife Sarah and their family, so that at least somebody would believe in him and stay with him. God needed him to be a giant of a believer and so the only way you make your inside muscles stronger is the same way you make your outward muscles stronger, by working out.

I have spent years and years attempting to build muscle mass by eating donuts and I am here to tell you it doesn’t work. I have tried and tried. Watching TV or watching movies on my couch has not strengthened my thigh muscles one bit I’m sorry to say. Even all of you who are into video games, you

now have extremely powerful thumbs, but that's all you've got. In the same way your faith will not get stronger unless God puts you through a workout. So what he did with this man is unbelievable.

Does God love me or not? When people wrestle with that dilemma, it's because we need God's approval and affection. But when we bring about solutions to that in a manmade way, it always goes bad because it doesn't work. When people want God to like them, they will do things for him first. They think, "If I keep the rules, if I clean myself up and obey everything, then he'll like me." It doesn't work. We're broken and we're sinful and cannot achieve it on our own.

Some people think: "If I go through the rituals, even though I'm a sinner, if I go through the rituals, if I go to church a lot, if I go to shrines," it doesn't work. Some people think: "If I pay him off, maybe I can bribe my way through life by paying God off. Payoffs always work in human life, maybe they'll work with God, too." Like: "I'll help build a building," or "I'll build a monument," or "I will endow worship services" or something like that. "If I give lots of money or make sacrifices, then he will like me." Doesn't work either. Some people do the ultimate sacrifice and give their life in a religious war, they think, "God will like me then." That's no guarantee either, for God has not said that he wants people to offer their lives as sacrifices.

God says: "I love you not based on what you have done for me, but on the basis of what I have done for you. I came to you to do what you could never do. And now I make all those benefits available to you through faith." And that's why he spent so much effort in helping to develop Abraham's faith. He led that man 800 miles away from home and set up his life in a land not his own where he lived as a traveler, a Bedouin. Never owned serious property his whole life long, never went back to the land of his fathers. That's when God said: "You're going to have a child." God took the sorest spot in Abraham's married life with Sarah and said to this 75 year old childless man: "You will have so many children they will number more than the stars." And then made him wait another 24 years before it actually happened! In this way, he was hammering and pounding and squeezing on Abraham's faith to bulk it up, bulk up his faith muscles, just as a good workout with weights will help bulk up your physical muscles. And this is the way in which God's blessings poured out into Abraham's life. This is the way in which Abraham knew with certainty: "I am connected to my God and he loves me."

Here is what separates Christianity from everything else. It is an outrageous statement and I wouldn't have the nerve to put it out there for you unless God had told it to us first, because it makes no sense but it's the truth. In fact, it's not only a truth, it's the truth. This is the heart and core. I have never seen the outrageousness of the gospel expressed more clearly than in the second paragraph of Romans 4.

*"Now to a person who works, his pay is not counted as a gift but as something owed"* (4). When you get your paycheck, you don't say to the HR clerk: "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you. Oh, thank you, thank you." You say: "Give me that thing" because they owe it to you. And if they don't give it up, you're calling your lawyer. It's a debt, it's an obligation. Your employer's not doing you a favor on payday, they're simply giving you what you have earned.

*"But to the person who does not work but believes in the God who justifies the ungodly,"* are you listening? *"His faith is credited to him as righteousness"* (5). Justifies the ungodly? That's outrageous, isn't it? That goes against every legal principle that you could think of. Our legal system on earth, we work hard at it, slave away at it, there's loads and loads—there's truckloads full of books of legal opinions and the straining efforts of tens of thousands of men and women who have tried to make a fair

system where the guilty get punished and the innocent go free. And God said: “I take great pride in giving a gift to you in which I justify the ungodly.”

But that’s your key out of your dilemma. That’s what takes all the pressure off of you to justify yourself. You haven’t done a very good job of justifying yourself, have you? What happens when you try to justify yourself? Well, one thing that always works is comparing yourself with other people farther down the food chain from you. Like: “Well, I’ve committed adultery, but not as bad as Muddy Waters.” Or, “I’ve stolen, but not as bad as Bernie Madoff.” You can always find somebody worse than you and then you can stand next to them and maybe think you’re a little taller.

Rationalizing sin doesn’t work. Doing mind games and pretending doesn’t work. Fantasy only puts off the problem until later. Drinking is a great idea for about an hour or two, then all your problems are worse, you have less money and you have a hangover and possibly are developing an addiction. That doesn’t work. In fact, nothing works except what God has done.

“My gift to you is through the violent and bloody death of the Son of God, I have chosen to justify the wicked, in fact, the whole world. And the ones who believe it get to keep it. Just believe it. I want you to know about it and believe it. That’s my goal.”

In Romans 4:16 we have an answer to that question that aches in our heart: “Does God like me and how do I know if he does or not?” It says: “*The promise is by faith,*” the promise of God’s affection, the promise of God’s love for you that will never be cheated on or taken away or reneged on. “*So that it may be according to grace,*” meaning, it’s his effort, his initiative, his doing, not ours. And it may be “*guaranteed.*”

This isn’t something that you achieve. God isn’t like a Scoutmaster pinning your Eagle Scout medals on you. This is his gift and it is: “*Guaranteed to all of Abraham’s descendants,*” all of his children. “*Not only to those who are of the law,*” meaning his blood children, the people who came about in the original nation of Israel, “*but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham.*” If you believe what Abraham believed, that makes you one of Abraham’s children and having God’s affection for you and commitment to you guaranteed. “*He is the father of us all*” (16). That makes me an Israelite today. I am a descendant of Abraham.

“*As it’s written: ‘I’ve made you a father of many nations’*” (17). And even though my bloodline is not originally Jewish, I am incorporated now into the fatherhood of Abraham. This is amazing. He looks at sinners like us and calls us holy. He looks at people like us who are children of Satan and calls us his children. This is his guarantee to you and me. By the power of his word decrees it to be so and we receive it through faith.

That’s the guarantee that these beautiful words: “He loves me now, loved me yesterday and will love me forever,” and I don’t have to pull petals off of flowers, playing a little game to guess whether he loves me or not. The resurrection of Jesus guarantees God’s love, guarantees the justification—meaning the “not guilty” verdict—that you need on your head now and that you’re really going to need when you step into your own version of court at the end of your life.

So here’s your answer to that anxious question: “Does God like me and how do I know if he does or not?” It’s not based on you or your performance, it’s not based on your obedience to his laws. It’s not based on how good of a job you’ve done of going through the rituals. It’s not based on whether or not your gifts to him or your bribes or payoffs have been big enough. You don’t have to die for him.

This chapter ends with a mighty blast: “*He was handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification*” (25). That means that the resurrection of Jesus

guarantees that your justification took place. It guarantees that God looks at you as though you had never sinned and calls you as holy as Jesus Christ himself. Isn't this incredible news? Jesus was raised to life. His victory and immortality guarantees yours. This is great news.

Dear Lord, we must have you in our lives. We absolutely must have a happy relationship with you. Thank you for telling us about the death and resurrection of our Savior Jesus, which gives us certainty and confidence to know that you love us, that our sins are forgiven, that you have justified us, that we are now righteous before you. Strengthen our faith so that this confidence will stay with us, now and always. In Jesus' name. Amen.