

## *Adoption Rules*

<sup>CEB</sup> **Romans 4:1-5, 13-17** So what are we going to say? Are we going to find that Abraham is our ancestor on the basis of genealogy? <sup>2</sup> Because if Abraham was made righteous because of his actions, he would have had a reason to brag, but not in front of God. <sup>3</sup> What does the scripture say? Abraham had faith in God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. <sup>4</sup> Workers' salaries aren't credited to them on the basis of an employer's grace but rather on the basis of what they deserve. <sup>5</sup> But faith is credited as righteousness to those who don't work, because they have faith in God who makes the ungodly righteous. <sup>13</sup> The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn't come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith. <sup>14</sup> If they inherit because of the Law, then faith has no effect and the promise has been canceled. <sup>15</sup> The Law brings about wrath. But when there isn't any law, there isn't any violation of the law. <sup>16</sup> That's why the inheritance comes through faith, so that it will be on the basis of God's grace. In that way, the promise is secure for all of Abraham's descendants, not just for those who are related by Law but also for those who are related by the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all of us. <sup>17</sup> As it is written: I have appointed you to be the father of many nations. So Abraham is our father in the eyes of God in whom he had faith, the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that don't exist into existence.

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Today's scripture passage has several important points in it but we'll only look at a few of them. One of the issues in this passage is adoption. I know a little bit about adoption. I was nine years old when Mom and Dad adopted my sister Susie. I had been an only child and a baby sister was something of an interruption in my life. I got over that, of course. The fact of her adoption quickly became a bit of history of no consequence. Susie was just one of my siblings and she was just like the rest of us in terms of love, importance, and place. In our family there was no asterisk or footnote after her name. A lot of people probably had no idea that Susie had been adopted.

Many of you know that Cathy and I have been adopted by a lady who is one of Bill's best friends. They were in choir together in high school and became really great pals. Terri took Cathy and me on as her second set of parents. We are so honored that she calls us Mom and Pop, and she and our daughter Sharon think of each other as sisters. It's a special honor because Terri reached across racial lines to accept us as family. There are no legal documents involved but the tie that binds us is love – and that's much better.

People even use the term adoption for pets they have, especially those that have been rescued from bad circumstances. So, the word adoption is used for relationships across genetic lines, across racial lines, and even across species lines. Adoption is an act of grace. It is an act of unmerited love. In all three cases, adoption is characterized by relationship, acceptance, love, and permanence.

In the fourth chapter of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul reminds us of God's relationship with Abraham. Out of the clear blue, it seems, God picked Abraham. God instigated the relationship. God told Abraham, "I'm going to make a great nation of you, and through you all the nations will be blessed. Leave your established home and your extended family and go to a place that'll be designated later. Go on an open-ended pilgrimage." Abraham trusted God. Paul tells us that that trust in God, that belief in God, was counted as righteousness. Abraham hadn't done anything, yet. Before he even put one foot in front of the other, God considered Abraham to be righteous.

That probably doesn't make much sense to us. How can Abraham be righteous when he hasn't done anything yet? But when we think about it, Paul's argument begins to make sense. God is the initiator. God pursues us. God approached Abraham. Abraham hadn't done anything to deserve that.

Being counted as righteous is simply a part of the relationship when Abraham trusted God. Abraham had no reason to be proud. He hadn't earned any of this.

This might begin to make a little more sense if we look at it from the opposite point of view. Suppose Abraham had approached God first. Suppose God had responded with, "Thanks for getting in touch with me! If you'll worship me and live by my rules, I'll make your clan huge and powerful. The whole world will come to know about you." Under this sort of relationship, Abraham would have been motivated by desire for fame, fortune, and recognition. All of his obedience would have been motivated by, "What can I get out of this relationship?" The relationship would be one of exchange. Abraham would be buying God's favor through various works. It'd be a simple matter of accounting – Abraham's efforts used to purchase blessings from God.

Actually, I think this is how many of us see our relationship with God. We need to be good enough to be on God's good side. We want to deserve to be in God's good graces. There must be some minimum requirement in order for us to be considered "good Christians" and we want to make sure that we've met that requirement. Perhaps without even realizing it, we're hoping our work for God will make us righteous and deserving.

In our competitive, achievement-driven world, we almost can't even imagine grace. In our world, you often have to work like the dickens to get what you deserve. Nobody's going to give you anything. You have to earn your way. Thank God, God isn't like us!

In the moments when they were really thinking clearly, the people of Israel had some understanding of how God acts. In Deuteronomy 7:7-8 we read, "It was not because you were greater than all other people that the LORD loved you and chose you. In fact, you were the smallest of peoples!<sup>8</sup> No, it is because the LORD loved you and because he kept the solemn pledge he swore to your ancestors." Israel knew that it was chosen not because of its worth but because of God's grace.

Abraham was loved before he took his first step on his pilgrimage. It was as if God adopted Abraham before Abraham knew he needed to be adopted. And Paul says that God's promises to Abraham apply not only to Abraham's genetic descendants, but that Abraham is the father of all people who trust in God. The inheritance isn't limited to biological genealogy. When we trust in God, we're related to each other by the faith of Abraham. You might say that we're adopted into the family, not because we deserve it, but because we are loved, and our trust in God is counted as righteousness.

When the will and message of God became embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, we could see and feel grace happening. As Jesus walked among us, healing people, feeding people, loving people, we witnessed his relationship with others, a relationship of acceptance and love without qualification. People did nothing to deserve Christ's love. They only placed their trust in him.

We're uncomfortable with valuable gifts given to us, gifts that we don't deserve. We don't want to feel obligated; we don't want to be beholden to someone. So perhaps we're reluctant to accept a major point in this short reading from the fourth chapter of Romans. After all, it's about the unmerited grace that comes from God to us. The Christian life is not a matter of doing good works to earn God's approval. Instead, it's a matter of doing good works because of God's love. You already have God's love and God's favor. Putting your faith and trust in God, you are counted as righteous, as atrocious as that might seem. So, knowing that, how will you respond? How will you live? Celebrate your adoption! Love because you are loved. Be gracious because you have received grace. Thanks be to God! Amen!

Sisters and Brothers,  
Do not blame your temptations on others.  
Look to Jesus for inspiration and strength to resist evil.  
Yield not to temptation