**“MAJOR THEMES FROM THE MINOR PROPHETS: HABAKKUK 2:4.”**

**“The Verse That Changes Everything.”**

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**Sermon Texts: Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:16-17**

**Introduction.**

If the verses of the Bible were a mountain range some would be foothills, some would be mountains reaching several thousand feet, and some would stretch far above the tree line into the rare air, snow covered and glistening in the bright sun full of glory and truth.

Habakkuk 2:4 is a tall mountain text that stands out and commands our attention. It makes us stop and look and think long and hard. It challenges preconceived notions and human ways of thinking of things. It’s one of those verses that changes everything.

**Habakkuk 2:4b** “…the righteous shall live by his faith.”

As I said last week Habakkuk 2:4 is the second most quoted OT verse in the NT (only Psalm 110 is quoted more frequently). It’s quoted in Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38.

It’s one of the single most important texts in Scripture. Pastor James Boice of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia went so far as to say, “To understand it is to understand the Christian Gospel and the Christian life” (quoted in John Blanchard, *Major Points in the Minor Prophets*, p. 181).

The great and important verses in the Bible, like Habakkuk 2:4 are almost always watershed verses. All of us are on one side or the other and it’s a matter of life and death which side you are on. This is one of those continental divide type of verses.

One way to see how important a verse is is to see how it impacts and changes history.

**Protestant Reformation.**

These seven words rocked the spiritual universe in the sixteenth century. This verse was a shot heard around the world and it turned the religious world upside down. From this one seed grew the Protestant Reformation and our Reformed faith.

The beginning of the sixteenth century was one of the darkest times of the Christian faith. The light of the glory of the gospel was nearly smothered out completely by centuries of works righteousness dust.

In one city in Germany there was student who was earnestly and desperately trying to find God and get right with God. He joined a monastery, he strictly observed the harshest holy orders, he relentless prayed, read, studied, meditated. He fasted for days, slept without a blanket in the winter.

He was driven by a constant nagging sense of God’s great holiness and his own sinfulness. How could a sinner satisfy God, how could a sinner get right with God, what could a sinner possibly do to earn God’s favor?

He tried to remember every sin so he could confess it, sometimes spending up to six hours in the confessional booth. He was driven to despair because nothing gave his mind and soul peace and rest. He came to hate God.

The young monk’s name, of course, was Martin Luther. He later wrote in his journal, “I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my Order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I.”

Martin Luther was captive to this oppressive religion of righteousness by good works, by rituals and prayers and confession and service and sacrifice. He was obsessed with trying to please God but every effort only left him more distant from God and more despondent toward God.

Martin Luther was just repeating the error of the Jews in Jesus’ day who were trying to please God by keeping the law. They piled laws upon laws, laws to help keep the laws, but the increasing burden was a crushing weight.

Even Paul who claimed to be blameless in his keeping of the law came to see that his righteousness was rubbish, it was trash, worthless (Philippians 3:4-9).

In April of 1515 Luther began teaching the book of Romans at the University in Wittenburg, Germany. As he was working his way through chapter one he got stuck on Romans 1:17 which contains a quote of Habakkuk 2:4.

**Romans 1:16-17** For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. **17**For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ***“The righteous shall live by faith.”***

This verse crushed him even further. He had been so conditioned by the teaching of the day that he thought the verse meant that the Gospel showed us how righteous God was and how righteous we had to be. Night and day he wrestled in intense study, meditation and prayer over this verse.

“I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but one expression, ‘the justice of God,’ because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.”

“Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in great love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.” (Martin Luther).

This insight into justification by faith triggered the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

God opened Luther’s eyes to understand what Paul was saying. Luther understood the Gospel for the first time. The only righteousness that God accepts is His righteousness. The only one who is righteous is God.

Jesus was the only one who ever kept the Law of God in His life and obedience; and only Jesus satisfied the wrath of God in His death. As a result only those who in faith turn to Jesus and wholly trust in His name are able to be righteous with Jesus’ righteousness.

***There are basically only two religions in the world.***

This truth changes everything and as I said earlier is a watershed verse. This verse sets Christianity apart from every other religion in the world. All religions can be put into ***two categories***, those where we work our way to heaven and those where heaven is a gift given by the grace of a loving and merciful God. Only Christianity is in the second category.

The first says, “If you will do such and such, then God will bless you or save you or deliver you or whatever.” The only difference between all of those religions is what the *such and such* is. Bathe is this river, kiss that rock, go to that city, do this work, perform that ritual, or even, if you will just say a prayer and give your heart to Jesus (from a sermon by John Reisinger, http://www.soundofgrace.com/jgr/index004.htm ).

The second says, “God makes us willing and able to be saved and to put our faith in Him.” God does the work of saving us.

“Justification by faith is the hinge on which true religion turns.” John Calvin.

This is the continental divide. This is the crossing of the Rubicon. This is line in the sand.

Martin Luther fired the shot that was heard around the world. The biblical/theological truth that he brought to light created so great an outcry that it split the Christian world in half. The central question was how are we justified, by works or by faith?

Scripture is clear:

**Romans 4:5** To the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. That is justification.

**Rom. 11:6** But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

**Philippians 3:9** Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith

**II Corinthians 5:21**For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

***What are the works that people do today to earn God’s favor?***

We try to live a good life, we don’t do all the things the pagans do. We used to be clearer about this not dancing, not going to movies, not doing any work on Sundays. Some Christians did even more, not playing cards, not drinking or smoking, the women didn’t wear make-up or pants.

What other works? We do family devotions at dinner, sometimes at every meal, we prayed, we read the Bible, we learned our catechism, we went to church not once but twice on Sundays, we kept your yards looking perfect, we washed our windows once a week, we tithed to the church and gave to missions, we sent our children to Christian school.

What does this mean? Should we not do any of those things? Should we stop doing them? Well, yes, there is something we need to stop doing, but it’s not those specific things. What we need to stop doing is thinking we are more righteous when we do them and we need to stop thinking that God will like us better when we do them and we need to stop measuring ourselves against others by who does how many of these things.

Thinking like that will actually make God displeased with us because that kind of thinking robs Christ of His glory and robs the cross of its power and importance. Christ plus anything else dishonors Christ, Christ plus nothing honors Christ.

The only reason for doing any of those things is as a grateful response to the most amazing free gift ever given. The only reason for doing any good work is as an act of worship and thanksgiving. The only reason for doing any of those things is to draw closer to the God who has already adopted us and accepted us.

**Is faith a work?**

We have to be careful that we don’t turn faith into our one work. Like saying that I am saved by my faith, that my faith earns for me my salvation.

**Ephesians 2:8-9** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **9**not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Faith is the gift of God by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Our faith has no power in and of itself, rather it’s the channel or conduit which God uses to give to us the righteousness of Christ.

***There are several ways to illustrate this.***

When we turn on the water facet and have all that cool, clean, refreshing water flow into our home, we don’t praise the pipes and facets, we praise the water, the gift that we have received that came through the pipe.

When we turn on the light switch and instantly receive warm glowing light we are thankful for the light, we don’t think about the wires and switches.

When a surgeon cuts us with his scalpel we don’t praise the scalpel for its work. The scalpel is the instrument in the surgeon’s hands through which we receive the surgeon’s expertise, skill, knowledge and ability. The scalpel is worthless, just a little hunk of steel, but it’s the means through which we receive the blessing of healing and health and help.

The scalpel doesn’t give life or save us, the surgeon does.

Faith doesn’t give life or save us, the object of our faith does. Salvation belongs to God.

God gives to us faith by His Spirit, and through that faith God pours out the grace of His salvation purchased by the blood of Jesus. That salvation comes because of the obedience and righteousness of Jesus, imputed to us as a gift from God.

We contribute nothing, we add nothing, we do nothing, there’s nothing we can boast about.

There has been a lot of talk in the news this week about the discovery of the Higgs Boson particle, or the God particle, the smallest atomic particle ever.

There is not even a Higgs Boson sized particle of righteousness or goodness in us that could get God’s attention. Those who think there is some goodness in man by which we can merit some of God’s goodness have bought into a lie from Satan and they rob God of the glory of His grace and gift given to us in His Son. Any credit we take, no matter how small, diminishes God.

**Application and Conclusion.**

So what? What’s the big deal? No matter who you are or what you have done, no matter how sinful you have been or are, the perfect righteousness of Christ is extended to you who will repent and believe in Jesus Christ as your only Savior and Lord.

To those that claim the Son, to those God gives the right to be children of the Father and to His children, the Father says, “You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased.”

We want to be a people and a church that magnifies the glory of Christ for the fullness and completeness of His redeeming work. He has done it all, He was paid in full. He has ransomed and rescued us from our sin and unrighteousness.

We want to be a people and a church that magnifies the person and work of Jesus Christ. I am not sure that there is any other doctrine that does that as much as this one. The doctrine of justification magnifies the fullness of the glory of Christ in the gospel

Faith honors God and all of His attributes and all His work. Faith takes man out of the equation and gives all the credit to God. Faith honors the Son whom the Father has sent.

The doctrine of justification is cause for worship. It has made the church sing for centuries. We are going to sing one of the great hymns about our justification and about our chains falling off. Pay attention to every word you sing, this hymn rings with the glorious truth of Scripture.

**Prayer**: Holy and righteous Father, thank you for this world-changing, history-changing, life-changing, heart-changing truth. Apply it fruitfully to our hearts that it might bear the fruit of worship, joy, peace, rest and deep gratitude. May you be glorified in your Son and in His perfect obedience and righteousness. In His name we pray. Amen.