

**BELIEVING ON HIM WHO JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY
(SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2012)**

Scripture Reading: 10 Commandments; Rom. 4:1-8

Some of you might remember the first time students from Russia visited CLA. One of the things we observed about these students was their interest with the vending machines in the cafeteria. Much has changed in Russia since that first visit, but these students who had some money quickly fell in love with our vending machines because there was nothing like that for them in Russia. For us the vending machines are not that special, but for them it was much different.

It is difficult to be fascinated and thankful with that which is common.

I think if we are honest, we admit that we can struggle with being thankful for the many gifts that we have in such abundance. And of course there is no way to respond to the blessings that God gives in the same way that a person who has very little might respond to the same blessings.

I use this as an illustration for our response to the familiar but the essential truth which we are covering in our study of Romans. I know very well that this is not the first time that you have heard the precious truth of justification by God's grace through faith alone. Hearing it expounded does not cause you to respond in the same way that Martin Luther did when he was given understanding of this truth.

The challenge then is to be still humble and thankful for God's Word. The challenge is also to appreciate that there is still much for us to learn. We are certainly familiar, but that doesn't mean we have mastered or learned all that we might be able to learn.

And most importantly the challenge is to then live in accordance with the truth that we confess is our only hope of salvation.

God sets before you the blessing of His sovereign grace in justification by faith alone.

We will look at Romans 4:1-8 in three parts, vv. 1-3, vv. 4-5, vv. 6-8.

1. ABRAHAM IS NO EXCEPTION TO JUSTIFICATION THROUGH FAITH ALONE, VV. 1-3

Rom. 4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? **2** For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God. **3** For what does the Scripture say? "*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*"

I mentioned last week that the end of chapter 3 gives in part the outline for the first part of chapter 4. In Romans 3:27, Paul speaks of boasting. **Boasting** is the subject of the first two verses of chapter 4. In Romans 3:27b-28, Paul speaks of justification by faith and not by works. This we see is the subject of verses 3-8.

The opening words of verse 4 also signal that there is a close connection between the end of chapter 3 and the continued discussion of chapter 4. The words **what then**, which are used 10x in the book of Romans, call you to think about what has already been stated in preparation for continued discussion. There are then close points of connection between the end of chapter 3 and chapter 4, but Paul is hardly just saying the same things again. The key observation of chapter 4 is that Paul uses the life of Abraham to further explore and apply the key points of Romans 3:27-31.¹

Observe also that in these opening verses, Paul continues to use a series of questions and answers, what we have before identified as a style called diatribe. Further you can see in verse 1 that Paul calls Abraham our father according to the flesh. This means that Paul is still focused on dealing with questions that his Jewish listeners especially might have raised. There is certainly application for Gentiles and for us, but Paul's primary concern is to deal with Jewish misconceptions to the truth he is presenting.

What is Paul asking in the question of verse 1? The verb, **has found**, doesn't here mean that Abraham was looking for something. The meaning of the verb **found** has to do with being granted a favored standing before someone who has the power to withhold or to give the favor he chooses.²

And it is best to see the phrase in the NKJV **according to the flesh** connected with the words **our father**. The word **flesh** is an important word in the book of Romans. And often there is a negative overtone in the word.³ Later Paul will speak of Abraham being the father of all who have the same faith of Abraham, but here Paul is speaking about Abraham as the father of the Jewish people in terms of fleshly descent.

In slightly different words, Paul in verse 1 is asking, **what shall we say about our father Abraham's standing before God?**

I have stated before that there is very good evidence that although the Jewish people at the time of the NT believed certainly in God's grace they also emphasized that human obedience was critical to being declared righteous by God.

In a similar way, Abraham was according to Jewish tradition a model example of law keeping.⁴

Jubilees 23:10 – Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life.⁵

1 Macc. 2:52 - Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?⁶

Pr. Man. 8 – Abraham did not sin against thee.

¹ Moo, 259.

² Dunn, 198.

³ Moo, 260; Dunn, 199.

⁴ Moo, 256.

⁵ Cited by Moo, 256.

⁶ NRSV translation.

Sirach 44:19 – No one has been found like him in glory.⁷

Now Scripture speaks very highly of Abraham also. In Genesis 26, God spoke of his covenant promises to Isaac as still being in effect,

Gen. 26:5 because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.

Paul has already argued that there can be no boasting before God, a boasting best understood in terms of earning the status of being righteous through human works at some level. Boasting is excluded based on the true understanding of faith and the fact that justification is by faith alone.

But was this the case also for Abraham?

If Abraham was justified by works, something many Jewish people would have said was the case, then Abraham would have had reason to boast.

But Paul states very clearly that Abraham had nothing to boast about before God. The end of verse 2, can be a little difficult to understand. The expression “**But not before God**” is *not* saying that maybe Abraham could have boasted before other men. Rather Paul is directly and strongly stating that Abraham could never boast before God and so it also the case that he was then not justified by works.

To further prove this to be the case, Paul quotes one of the most important verses in the life of Abraham, Genesis 15:6. **Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.**

In terms of understanding Abraham’s life and his standing before God, the most important thing that can be said about Abraham is that he believed God. He believed in the promises that God gave to him.

O. Palmer Robertson has written,

It may not be supposed that Abraham fully grasped all the details of the promise concerning the seed as it unfolded through the subsequent generations. But he certainly had knowledge of the alienation of all nations from their Creator, and was filled with the same longing for removal of the curse that had been expressed by the father of Noah at the birth of his son: “This one shall give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the Lord has cursed” (Gen 5:29). Because of trust specifically in the coming seed that would deliver men from the curse and would introduce them into the blessedness of God, Abraham was regarded as righteous.⁸

The word **accounted** is the key word in this chapter, used 11x, but not always translated the same way in the NKJV.

Verse 3 – accounted; Verse 4 – counted

⁷ Last two quotations cited by Moo, 256.

⁸ O. Palmer Robertson, “Genesis 15:6: New Covenant Expositions of an Old Covenant Text.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 42, no. 2 (Spr 1980): 268-269.

Verse 5 – accounted; Verse 6 – imputed

Verse 8 – impute.

Three more times it is translated as **accounted** and three more times as **imputed** in the rest of the chapter.

Other versions translate this same word as either **count**, **credit**, or **reckon**. It is a verb that was also used in the business world in terms of accounting.⁹

And this word is at the heart of the doctrine of justification. Justification is the **accounting** of Christ's righteousness to you because He took your sin. And this takes place not **because** of your faith, but through your faith.

Now look closely at verse 3. **Is Paul saying that Abraham's belief or faith is equivalent to righteousness?** Some believe this and try to argue that God sees human faith as the equivalent of doing righteous acts.

This interpretation will not stand, because the NT never describes the act of faith as being the ground or cause of our righteousness.¹⁰ **Romans 4:3 is not an equation.**¹¹ There is a connection between faith and justification. Belief and faith are essential. But Genesis 15:6 is not saying that **faith** is another form of righteousness which then gives you acceptance before God. The grammar of Genesis 15:6 when compared with other OT and NT passages shows that God accounted to Abraham a status of righteousness that Abraham did not have. This was God's gracious act to Abraham, not God paying Abraham something that he deserved either because of his faith or his actions.¹²

Douglas Moo notes, that Paul here is certainly standing against the common Jewish interpretation which viewed Genesis 15:6 through the lens of Genesis 22 (Abraham's offering up of Isaac), so that Abraham's faith became his obedience to God and was regarded as a work for which God owed Abraham.¹³

2. WHAT IS TRUE FOR ABRAHAM IS TRUE ALSO FOR YOU, VV. 4-5

Romans 4:4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

These two verses are formatted in the NKJV as parts of two different paragraphs, but these two verses should be seen together.

⁹ NET Note, s.v. Romans 4:3.

¹⁰ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 745.

¹¹ Comments of John Murray cited by Reymond, 746.

¹² Moo, 262. See also GNT Key s.v. Romans 4:3; Robertson, 265. This is *contra* Witherington, 120-121. Witherington, I believe, confuses the issue by stating that the exchange is between Abraham's faith and Abraham's righteousness.

¹³ Moo, 262.

Verse 4 is a simple point taken from the world of business, but what a powerful point is made when taken together with verse 5.

What is the point of verse 4? If you have a job where you are paid, your pay is not an expression of grace on the part of your employer but rather the paying off a debt that your employer owes to you in exchange for the work that you did. Now, you might be very thankful that you have a job. Your employer might be a very nice person to have hired you, but when you get paid, the pay you receive is what is owed to you because of a contract.

Verse 4 is a simple point from the world of business, but it is a very important point as Paul shows in verse 5 when it comes to how we stand before God and can be accepted in His sight as righteous.

If human works play any role in God accepting us or declaring us righteous, then salvation is not completely God's gracious work but to some degree it would be God paying a debt to sinful men and women. And this would give a place for boasting. You would be justified in saying, God you did 99.99% but I did 0.01% of the work, and for that small part you owe me. If we have any part in being justified, no matter how tiny this might be, then God owes us something. Do you see how ridiculous this would be? Later we will reflect on this same point, but let's look now at verse 5.

Verse 5 emphasizes four things.

First it speaks of him who does not work. This is not referring to a lazy person or a lazy Christian, but rather stating that when God justifies a sinner, it has absolutely nothing to do with the work or obedience of the sinner.

Second, we see Paul showing a correspondence between Abraham and all other believers. Abraham believed God. Here in verse 5 we have the phrase, "believes on Him who justifies the ungodly." Saving faith is expressed in terms of believing **in** or **on** God. In Romans 3:26 we read of faith in Jesus. Here the expression is **believing on Him**, God the Father, who justifies the ungodly.

Saving faith is not a work that a sinner does, rather it is a gift and a response to God's work. Saving faith often is defined as knowledge, assent, and trust.¹⁴

Knowledge – what God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have done in saving sinful men and women.

Assent – belief that the Bible and the gospel message are true.

Trust – a full resting in God's work alone as the basis for all hope and assurance.

Third, look carefully at the phrase, **who justifies the ungodly**. This phrase maybe doesn't sound so shocking, because we are used to hearing it, but it is a provoking phrase.

Now what Paul is saying is **not in contradiction** with other parts of Scripture, but listen to a few OT verses.

Prov. 17:15 He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, Both of them alike *are* an abomination to the LORD.

¹⁴ Reymond, 726.

Ex. 23:7 Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked.

The context here of Romans 4 is not identical. In Romans 4, why may God justify the ungodly? The answer was given already in Romans 3:25. Jesus Christ was set forth as the mercy seat, the place where the justice of God could be given full expression, such that God is perfectly righteous in justifying the ungodly.

The other shocking aspect of this phrase is that Paul would be stating that Abraham was certainly part of the ungodly. Of course, Paul has already stated this – there is no difference, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The wonder of God’s grace is not that he justifies the righteous but the ungodly.

Fourth, we see the phrase, faith is accounted for righteousness, which is similar to verse 3, it was accounted to him for righteousness.

Again, the reason why Paul speaks of faith as counting for righteousness is that it is through faith that we receive the righteousness which God accounts to us.

3. GOD’S SOVEREIGN WORK IS THE SOURCE OF TRUE BLESSING, VV. 6-8.

Romans 4:6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

7 *“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered;*

8 *Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.”*

Do you see the repeated emphasis in this section on righteousness apart from works? And you know that this is not the only place where this emphasis is found, which is why we are right in emphasizing this as being central to what we confess about salvation. Could Scripture be anymore clear?

It is often thought that Paul now speaks in these verses of David and Psalm 32 because Paul was following a Jewish model of interpreting Scripture by connecting passages that share a word or words in common. This model is not that different from what we do today in going to places in Scripture that speak in a similar way.

But I think it is also significant to see Paul using both the example of Abraham and David in light of the two greatest covenant promises found in the OT made with Abraham and David.

In both 1 Kings 11:4 and 15:3 we read concerning Solomon and Abijam, “his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was **the heart of his father David.**”

In Acts 13:22, Paul in summarizing the history of Israel spoke of the testimony found of David in 1 Samuel 13:14.

“I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.”

But the context of Romans 4 is not the same and so importantly Paul refers not to the various testimonies in the OT concerning David but speaks of David’s only hope, which had absolutely

nothing to do with his own works. The OT is very clear in describing some of the wicked things that David did. So clearly David's hope was not found in his loyalty to God or even that He was a man after God's own heart. David's hope was in the knowledge of lawless deeds and sins being forgiven and covered.

One commentator draws attention to the words that David used in Psalm 32. The word translated **lawless deeds** and the word **sins** in the Greek translation of the OT were words used to describe actions of those **outside of God's covenant with Israel**. David was therefore describing a forgiveness that could never be earned by doing the works of God's law.¹⁵

We see here also from this quotation of Psalm 32, two very important points concerning justification.¹⁶

First, we see again the emphasis that justification is not moral transformation of a sinner but rather a legal declaration and a change in status. This is emphasized by verse 8 – Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute or count sin.

The reason why God is perfectly just in making this declaration is not stated here. What is emphasized is the blessing, a blessing that has nothing to do with human effort or merit.

Second, we see that justification involves the forgiveness of sins. Two words are used here – forgiven and covered. The debt of sins is released. The awful stain of sin is covered over according to God's grace and His righteousness.

Though all this theological language may just sound technical and rather boring, what David emphasizes here is blessing and joy! The word **blessed** is the same word used in Psalm 1. The Greek word used here is the same word used in the Beatitudes. Some prefer the translation, happy. I suppose I prefer the translation blessed but we might say it is a God-given-blessed-happiness. What could be more precious to know?

CONCLUSION:

The repeated emphasis of this text is that justification is not through human works or effort, but clearly we know that God commands that His people do good works. I have discussed before the difference between good works as the basis for justification and good works which flow from being justified. It is not a complicated matter.

I would like to explain the difference in light of Christ's perfect life and suffering for our sins.

If good works in some way are part of being declared righteous before God, then you would have to be able to directly compare those good works with what Jesus did. And who would dare be able to stand before God and say, my works can be compared with what Jesus did? My effort and sincerity can be compared with the suffering of Jesus in Gethsemane and his suffering as nails were driven into His body and he hung for six excruciating hours upon the cross. Would you dare make this comparison? Only a fool would do so.

¹⁵ Dunn, 206.

¹⁶ Moo, 266.

But I do think it is very appropriate to speak of good works done in response to the perfect life and suffering of Christ as a testimony of our love for our Lord and Savior and an expression of thankfulness. Oh, those works directly compared to what Jesus has done will seem so small, but they are done **not** trying to measure up to what Jesus did.

No one will stand before God on the day of judgment and say, Lord, because of what I have done I deserve entrance into your kingdom. But I trust you will be able to stand before God and say, my only trust is in your work, in the work of Christ on the cross. And Lord, my humble efforts are nothing, but I have sincerely tried to do your will. They are a witness not to my goodness but to your mercy shown to me a sinner saved by your grace.

In a similar way as we come to the Lord's Table we are not declaring our goodness and how we deserve to be fed by God, the food of kings and priests, bread and wine. No, we come like the Syro-phonician woman, declaring, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs."¹⁷

We come rejoicing that God in his grace does far more than just feed us crumbs. Rather we are privileged to eat and drink of the fullness of what Christ offers in Himself.

God sets before you the blessing of His sovereign grace in justification by faith alone which we now celebrate in coming to the Table of our Lord.

Prayer

Hymn – 439

BENEDICTION – HEBREWS 12:1-2

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

¹⁷ Mark 7:28.