

Sermons through

Romans

Justifying the Ungodly

Romans 4:5-8

With Study Questions

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But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, 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”* (Romans 4:5-8).

Introduction

We open our Bibles and read of the actions of certain notables of the faith. We begin with the rebellion of sinless Adam (Genesis 3:6); the faithful preaching of “just” Noah, a man of integrity (Genesis 6:9), yet embarrassed with drunkenness (Genesis 9:20); the faith of Abraham (Genesis 15:6) followed by his foolishness with Hagar (Genesis 16:4). We read of Joseph, of whom very little negative can be found but also of his brothers of whom very little good can be found (Genesis 35-50).

We read of the great deliverer, Moses, whose disobedience kept him from entering the Promised Land (Numbers 20:11, 12). We read of David, as a man who was declared to have followed God **“with all his heart” (1 Kings 14:8)** yet behaved deplorably in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Samuel 11). Not to speak irreverently, but one is hard-pressed to find a biblical character in the Old Testament we would feel comfortable with in our church!

And it is not as if the New Testament is entirely different. We see the apostles scattering and denying Christ (Matthew 26:31-35). We read of conflict and immorality going unchecked within the church (1 Corinthians 5:1, 2). Even after Pentecost we read of factions, fear and hypocrisy among the most faithful apostles (Galatians 2:11-14). Even the great Apostle Paul, in his full maturity as a follower of Christ, bemoaned his own unrighteousness and counted it merely as a vehicle to be used by God for God’s own glory:

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen (1 Timothy 1:15-17).

As we shall see in verses seven and eight, it was the occasion of great sin that presented us with the message of God's great grace. I must offer the early disclaimer that what we are looking at this morning should never be thought of as a license for sin (1 Peter 2:16). As I have mentioned before, there will be the high call of human behavior to which the Apostle will turn in the twelfth chapter of this epistle:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service.* ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12:1, 2).*

Paul followed this call to the point where his sacrifice was no mere metaphor but cost him his own life, being **“poured out as a drink offering” (2 Timothy 4:6)**. Peter, as well, would pay the ultimate price (John 21:18, 19). So when we begin our text this morning with the words **“But to him who does not work,”** it certainly should not be understood as somehow condoning disobedience or lethargy in our thoughts words and deeds. Such would not be consistent with the teaching of the Scriptures nor the actions of its writers.

Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God (1 Peter 2:16).

But it must be stated up front that the righteousness and the beatitudes associated with that righteousness in the passage before us has nothing to do with (and by this is meant, are not on account of) even the most stellar holiness of the most righteous saint (Jesus Himself excepted of course). In order for Peter's admonition to make sense, the **"freedom"** of which Peter writes must be grasped. Paul will later write that **"having been set free from sin, (we) have become slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6:18)**. In this passage Paul sets his telescope and microscope on that freedom.

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness (Romans 4:5).

Justifying the Ungodly

Again, it would be a great error to read the words **"does not work"** as a license for sin. Perhaps a good paraphrase would be **"But to him who does not work to justify himself but believes on Him who justifies,"** would be helpful.

We will often see pretty lofty descriptions of the faithful in the Bible:

Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God (Genesis 6:9).

because David did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite (1 Kings 15:5).

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and

upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil (Job 1:1).

But when it comes to the issue before us, there is one word Paul uses to describe all of mankind, **“ungodly”** *asebe*. The word means irreverent, impious, to practice the opposite of what the fear of God demands. To live in the world as if there is no God. One might say it describes a functional atheist. The modern western atheist (most of whom have been raised in evangelized nations adopting Christian values) comfort themselves with references to the great evil done in the name of religion. And certainly bad religion and no religion are competitors when it comes to human sorrow and conflict.

But to live in a world as if there is no God means to place one’s own opinion at the pinnacle of the human economy. We are left with the bowels of man as the oracle shaping our cultural, not to mention eternal, destinies. Needless to say, this became a Scriptural indictment against humankind:

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 21:25).

And it is not as if ungodliness is some sort of inert, victimless crime. I think it might be of interest to quote Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s take on the greatest tragedy to afflict the world, perhaps, since the beginning of time—a tragedy which claimed the lives of more innocent people than all religious wars in history put together. He wrote:

Over a half century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of old people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened." Since then I have spent well-nigh 50 years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already

contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by the upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: “Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this happened.

Quite the testimony! But here is the point. When it comes to peace with God, to being pardoned, to acquiring justification (acquittal of our sins and all that entails), we all fall into the category of **“ungodly.”** Paul makes his point by appealing to yet another Old Testament luminary, David. Whereas Abraham discovered he had nothing to boast about before God and was accounted as righteous by faith,

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” (Romans 4:6-8).

No Works Allowed

The blessed man, the happy man, the man whose soul is at peace, the man who has true freedom is the man **“to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works.”** This is a message in which the young, strong, righteous, ambitious and forward thinking person may have little interest. But the sick and the broken (people who, when you’re in the ministry you seem to be in contact with quite often) find unfathomable solace!

It is by the God-given gift of faith alone in Christ alone, not only pardoned, but an heir to all blessedness that heaven has to offer. Question 73 of the Larger Westminster Catechism says it:

How doth faith justify a sinner in the sight of God? Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces which do

always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it, (Gal. 3:11, Rom. 3:28) nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification; (Rom. 4:5, Rom. 10:10) but only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness. (John 1:12, Phil. 3:9, Gal. 2:16)¹

It is not the other graces which always accompany faith, nor is it the sanctifying work of the Spirit in our lives that somehow prepares us for our meeting with God, but it is the imputed righteousness of Christ alone credited to my account that finds me at peace with God.

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. ⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:7-9).

Ironically, it is the very sanctification of the Spirit—that process of being made holy—which often becomes the greatest enemy of our appreciation of the unaccompanied grace of God. Paul will quote David’s thirty-second Psalm to explain and buttress his point—a Psalm, one might argue, that young David, who struck down **“both lions and bears” (1 Samuel 17:36)**, not to mention Goliath (vs 49) would never have written.

Psalm 32

¹ *The Westminster larger catechism: With scripture proofs.* 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

In this Psalm we begin to get a deeper appreciation of what it means to have our sins forgiven. When our children offend one another we tell them to say they're sorry, then we tell the offended child to forgive, which usually amounts to the words "that's okay" or something like that, then the day just moves forward. But the forgiveness of God is not so one dimensional. For when God is offended, He is not only offended as a person, but as a Just Judge who, in order to be true to His own character, must punish sin and cannot acquit the guilty (Exodus 23:7).

So when we read of the blessed man "**whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sin are covered**" we must ask by whom are they covered and how? And "covered" does not mean, as some suggest, that they sins are not vanquished but merely hidden. "**Covered**" here can be used the same way we might tell someone who we're eating with, we have the bill covered—in other words, we'll pay.

Clearly, the One who pays is Christ. And what is the payment? The short answer is His own life (Matthew 20:28). But a longer and more thorough answer (and a necessary answer for this passage to make sense) is that His payment includes His entire life of righteousness, which included an entire life of suffering, culminating with the wrath of the Father falling upon Him for the sins of all He would save (Isaiah 53:6).

David writes of it in the negative when he says: "**Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.**" But Paul writes of it in the positive when he writes of "**the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness.**"

It is the glorious transfer of our sin to Christ (with all its judgments) and His righteousness to us (with all its riches) which produces the blessed man. So it might be of value to ask if this includes you. Have you abandoned your own righteousness that you might find rest and freedom in a righteousness that is not your own? Even as a Christian, have you taken comfort in your own righteousness in the face of God?

We might finish with a quick look at the Psalm Paul chose, for it not only includes this glorious imputation but, in a very personal and experiential way, David will comment on what held him back from appreciating the grace of God.

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered. ² Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit *there is* no deceit. ³ When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long. ⁴ For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer.⁵ I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” And You forgave the iniquity of my sin (Psalm 32:1-5).

When David kept silent about his sin, when he ignored it, when he failed to confess it, when he sought to hide it from God, **“his bones grew old”** God’s **“hand was heavy”** upon him and his vitality was **“turned into the drought of summer.”**

It is precisely here that we bring nothing to God but our confession of sin. The beatitude, the blessedness, the true and eternal joy and happiness is found in the righteousness of another. Let our hearts turn toward Him as we prepare for the Lord’s Supper.

Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose there are so many characters in the Bible who don’t seem to do well when it comes to righteousness (pages 2, 3)?
2. Paul will write “But to him who does not work.” Does this mean Christians should not seek to walk in obedience? Explain (pages 3, 4).
3. What does it mean to be “ungodly?” Who are included among the ungodly? What are the consequences of ungodliness (pages 4, 5)?
4. Define and discuss faith, justification and imputation. Why are these important (pages 6, 7)?

5. According to Psalm 32, what might keep someone from appreciating the grace of God (pages 7, 8)?

