

## God Justifies the Ungodly

Romans 4:1-8

Read Romans 3:23-4:8.

At the very heart of the Christian Faith is the doctrine of Justification by faith alone.

**Romans 3:23-24** <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

The only means by which we can receive the favor of God is through faith in Jesus Christ. God, the Father, is...

**Romans 3:26** the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Faith is not itself righteousness.

Jesus is righteousness.

And faith embraces Jesus.

Faith is the instrument by which we take hold of Jesus Christ. As such, faith is opposed to works. You can seek God's approval through your works, or, you can seek God's approval through faith. But you cannot do both.

When you seek God's approval through works, you bring the things that you have done to God as gifts. When you seek God's approval through faith, you come to him empty handed, or even bearing the guilt of the wrong things that you have done.

Faith seeks God's blessing through mercy alone, as a gift.

Why would God make faith the means of obtaining his blessing? Faith magnifies God's love and mercy. Faith removes our boasting.

**Romans 3:27** <sup>27</sup> Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.

By what kind of law?

By a law of works?

No, but by the law of faith.

It seems strange for Paul speak of the "law of faith".

But Paul can use the word law in various ways.

Here he is using it in the way that we use the word "principle".

The principle of gaining God's blessing by faith/believing.

The principle of gaining God's blessing by working.

The principle of faith makes Christianity unique. Every other religion of the world in one way or another seeks to earn God's favor through works. Only Christianity makes faith in the righteousness of another the fundamental principle by which we gain favor with God.

The principle of faith is radical. And it seems to go against another fundamental principle of life. What is that principle? It is the principle that how we live matters.

If it is the works of Jesus Christ that earn me favor with the Father, then do my works matter at all? Tell someone long enough that their decisions ultimately do not matter, and you will "de-motivate" them.

Instead of helping people, the gospel might possibly turn them into selfish monsters. If you do not find new ways of motivating people to live rightly, then this wonderful principle of faith would, in the end, not turn out so wonderful.

Paul is keenly aware of this. And he devotes the majority of the rest of the book of Romans to reconstructing new motivations to live rightly.

Paul does not believe that Justification by Faith Alone destroys the principle that our actions “DO MATTER”. In fact, Paul is going to make the case that apart from living by faith, true obedience to the Law is impossible. It is the person who continually embraces Jesus Christ who will “uphold” the standard of the Law.

This brings us to Romans 3:31, which I conveniently ignored last week.

**Romans 3:31** <sup>31</sup> Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?  
By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Do those who believe that they are justified by faith alone in Christ alone overthrow the law?  
Answer: No, we uphold the law.

What law is Paul talking about?  
Is he talking about the law of works?  
Or the moral law written on our hearts?  
Or the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai?

These are not easy questions. And it is part of what makes reading Paul so confusing. I think it is best to take Paul’s meaning here as the “moral standard of righteousness”. And I think that the 10 Commandments serve as the best summary of that moral standard. Other than the example of Jesus Christ.

So, Paul is saying that accepting the principle of Justification by faith alone, rightly understood, does not result in people caring less about living rightly according to God’s standard. It results in people caring more about God’s standard. They uphold the law.

Does faith cancel out the importance of obedience?  
No, faith establishes obedience. Those who live by faith care most about obedience to God’s standard. Has the coming of the Gospel of Jesus Christ put an end to the value and importance of the Mosaic Law? When Paul chose the word “uphold” he was purposely using covenantal language.

The Greek word that Paul uses *histemi*.  
Now, *histemi* is a very common word that basically means to “set in place, to stand, or to establish”.  
This word is intimately connected with the establishing of OT covenants, particularly God’s covenant with Abraham.

ESV **Genesis 17:7** And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

When God redeemed his people from Egypt, God uses this same word.

ESV **Exodus 6:4** I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners.

The point is this: when Paul says that they “uphold” the Law, he is using covenant terminology. Some translations say, “establish the law.”

Paul is merely saying that the Gospel of Justification by faith is not contrary with the Mosaic Law as a standard of obedience.

The Gospel “establishes” the Law.

Paul is here affirming the goodness of the Mosaic Law, not as a means of justification before God, but absolutely as a standard of righteousness.

Paul believes that it is those who live by faith who most keep God’s law. Understanding how this is the case will take some time. But if it were not true then the Gospel would be a sham. If believing in Christ resulted in you no longer caring about how you lived day to day, then the Gospel would be anathema. We should run from it.

But Paul believes the opposite:

He believes that the Law is established by faith, those who are living by faith will seek to uphold the law, rightly understood.

So, this is the big picture of where Paul is going. Verse 31 is the beginning point of Paul’s case that believing in Jesus results in obedience. Faith establishes obedience.

So, where does Paul begin in building his case? He begins by establishing that the principle of faith is not something new. Faith has always been the instrument by which God’s people have gained God’s favor.

How does Paul prove this?

He goes to the foremost Patriarch of the OT: Abraham.

Why does he go to Abraham? Why not go to Moses?

Paul knows that Abraham is the perfect example for two reasons:

1. Paul can clearly demonstrate from Genesis that Abraham was justified by faith.
2. Abraham was considered by many Jews to have been Justified by his keeping of the Law.

Many Jews believed that Abraham was justified by his works, especially in his work of offering Isaac his son as an offering (Gen. 22).

Jewish sources:

“Remember the deeds of the ancestors, which they did in their generations; and you will receive great honor and an everlasting name. Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?” (I Maccabees. 2)

“For Abraham was perfect in all his actions with the Lord and was pleasing through righteousness all the days of his life.” (Jubilees. 23:10)

“And we find that Abraham our father had performed the whole Law before it was given, for it is written, ‘Because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.’ (Mishnah. Kidd. 4.14)’.

Many Jews had such a high view of Abraham that they taught that Abraham was justified before God through his own works, his own keeping of the Law.

Paul knows better. The Scriptures teach that Abraham was justified by faith.  
Romans 4:1.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham,  
our forefather according to the flesh?

“What is it that Abraham, our Patriarch, gained by his obedience?”

According to the flesh is a way of saying “in himself/in his own obedience.”

That is why Paul connects “according to the flesh” with Abraham’s personal works of obedience.

2 For if Abraham was justified by works,  
he has something to boast about,  
but  
not before God.

If Abraham was justified by his own obedience to the law (works) then he would be the exception to what I said at the end of chapter 2. No one can boast.

But I have already established that no one can boast before God. None whatsoever!  
That includes Abraham.

Abraham may have been willing to offer his son Isaac to God which clearly demonstrated both his faith and his love for God, but if you go back and look at Abraham’s whole life, he was far from perfect.

So, if Abraham was not justified by his works, how was he justified?

3 For what does the Scripture say?  
"Abraham believed God,  
and it was counted to him as righteousness."

This is an absolutely clear statement in Scripture as to the means by which Abraham was justified. It was not by works. It was by believing God and his promise to him.

It is important that we fit this statement in its proper context.

God calls Abraham not because of his godliness. He calls him out of a lifestyle of worshipping false gods. Abraham begins as an ungodly man.

**Joshua 24:2** <sup>2</sup> And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.

We read of God's call in Genesis 12.

**Genesis 12:1-3** Now the LORD said<sup>1</sup> to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."<sup>1</sup>

Abraham is an example of God promising blessing to someone who is ungodly.

Several challenges confront Abraham between God's initial call and the encounter in Genesis 15. He finds that there are obstacles to his experience of the blessings that God had promised.

The promised land experiences a famine. There are other people living in the Promised Land. And his wife Sara cannot get pregnant. So, in the face of good reasons to doubt God's initial promise, Abraham is doing that very thing.

**Genesis 15:1-6** After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." <sup>2</sup> But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue<sup>1</sup> childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" <sup>3</sup> And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."

How does God respond to Abraham's doubting?

<sup>4</sup> And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son<sup>1</sup> shall be your heir." <sup>5</sup> And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

He could have immediately provided a child for Sara. But instead he simply promises that he will provide an heir and that all of the previous promises will come wonderfully true. In other words, God simply says, "Trust me, my promises to you will come true."

At this time, the writer, Moses, simply tells us two pieces of information that he could have only known by Divine revelation:

<sup>6</sup> And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

First, Abraham believed the LORD.

It is important to note that this is the first use of the word “believe” in the Bible. That is not to say that there was no belief before this time. We are just recognizing that this moment is a foundational moment for our understanding of the meaning of believing.

This belief is not attached to any outward action. As time goes on, Abraham will demonstrate evidence in his actions that his faith is real and living. But that is not what is said here. At this moment, Abraham’s faith is really invisible to the world. Of course God can see this inward faith. We know this because God responds to it. But it is important to take the time to ask the question: Do I believe God’s promises to me?

**John 3:16** <sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world,<sup>1</sup> that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

Do you believe that Jesus Christ will truly give you eternal life?

That is something different than simply telling someone else, “I believe.” It requires a bit of soul searching. You have to believe that the words of John 3:16 and many others, are not merely the words of men, but actually God speaking to you.

Do you believe that?

And you have to believe that Jesus is indeed who he claimed to be, the Messiah: fully God and fully man in two distinct natures and one person forever.

And you have to believe that when he died on the cross, his death actually satisfied the justice of God such that he is now able to free you from your sins.

And you have to believe that your first responsibility is to believe in him rather than your own ability to save yourself.

And you then have to cast all of your marbles into one basket. And give yourself into his arms.

Do you believe?

That’s what Abraham did. He believed. He may have not understood how God’s promises were connected to Jesus like we do today, but he still had to believe that God’s promises would be fulfilled somehow. The Hebrew word for believe is “Amen”.

This belief occurred in a moment. It occurred in Abraham’s heart. And God immediately sees this faith and then reacts to that faith. How does he react?

and he counted it to him as righteousness.

God counted it (Abraham’s belief/faith) to Abraham as righteousness.

In order to understand this statement we have to have some understanding of the word “counted”.

The Hebrew verb is ( $\mu^1$ shab).

$\text{bv};x^1$  ( $\mu^1$ shab) **think, plan, make a judgment, imagine, count.**

The Greek word, used by Paul in Romans and also in the Greek translation of the OT (LXX), is *logizomai*. It basically has the same meaning as ( $\mu$ 'shab).

**logi,zomai** count, reckon, calculate, take into account; credit, place to one's account; consider, think, suppose; evaluate, look upon as, class; maintain, claim; think on, reflect upon

It is helpful and explained by many that this is a term used in book keeping. There is a change in the numbers. Nothing is changed in the actual person. God has simply altered the accounts. You once had a debt against you. Now you have a positive credit to your account.

But, while I completely agree with this way of thinking about "counting", I think it can have the effect of being too impersonal, too statistical.

The counting is being done by God himself. It is personal. God, has new thoughts towards you. He thinks differently about you. Whereas before he looked at you as ungodly and under his just wrath, now he looks at you as righteous, as having only and always done what is right.

God no longer sees you as sinner. He sees you as righteous in his Son, only because you believe.

Abraham was not counted as righteous because of his works. He was counted as righteous because he believed God's promise to him.

Being counted righteous by faith is fundamentally opposed to be counted righteous by works. To be counted righteous by works is to merit the righteous standing.

Jesus was counted righteous in this way. He perfectly worked righteousness all his life. So, on the day of Judgment he will be able to say, "I earned the title of righteousness."

4        Now to the one who works,  
              his wages are not counted  
                  as a gift  
                  but  
                  as his due.

If you work all day for someone at an agreed upon wage, at the end of the day, your employer actually owes you your pay. For him not to give it to you would be stealing.

But we do not earn the status of righteousness.

5        And  
              to the one who does not work  
                  but  
                  trusts him who justifies the ungodly,  
                  his faith is counted as righteousness,

Here we see that we all have to choose. We can either trust in our own works. Or we can trust in God who justifies the ungodly. We cannot have both.

Do you or do you not believe that God can “justify the ungodly”?

Now Paul seamlessly moves us to the contemplation of another OT Saint: David.

Some, may have believed Abraham was justified by his good works, but it would have been very difficult to build the same case for David. David failed miserably.

David is a case of God justifying him in his ungodliness.

Do you believe that God can declare you righteous and think about you in an entirely different way only through belief in Jesus, before you are in any way changed, internally or externally?

God is not said to justify the godly.

Neither is he said to justify the one who is on the path to godliness. God justifies the ungodly, simply because he believes.

King David is the perfect example of this very thing.

6       just as David also speaks of the blessing  
          of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:  
7               "Blessed are those  
                  whose lawless deeds are forgiven,  
                  and  
                  whose sins are covered;  
8               blessed is the man  
                  against whom the Lord will not count his sin."

David is known, as a man “after God’s own heart.” That means that David cared deeply about knowing and obeying God’s will.

**Acts 13:22** <sup>22</sup> And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.'

But it was not in his obedience that David trusted to gain God’s favor, to gain the blessing. David sought God’s blessing even after his greatest season of disobedience.

Paul understands that there is one “ultimate blessing” that connects David and Abraham.

“David speaks of THE blessing” What blessing is he talking about?

He is talking about the blessing promised to Abraham. The blessing of the kingdom of God. The blessing of salvation, of righteousness, of perfect joy and bliss.

David speaks of this blessing.

But he does not speak of gaining this blessing because of his moments of devotion.



He does not offer to God his slaying of Goliath, or his bringing the ark to Jerusalem.

How does David assure himself that he possesses the blessing of God?

By reminding himself that God no longer counts his sin against him.

**Psalm 32:1-5** Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. <sup>2</sup> Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. <sup>3</sup> For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. <sup>4</sup> For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up<sup>1</sup> as by the heat of summer. Selah <sup>5</sup> I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

David uses the same word that Abraham used: counts, reckons.

Abraham's faith results in God counting to him righteousness.

David's faith results in God not counting his sins against him.

They are two sides of the same coin.

So, let's step back and ask the question: What is Paul doing here?

Paul has given two OT examples of men with, comparatively speaking, awesome credentials. One was declared by God to be a man after his own heart. The other loved God more than his own son. But both of these men believed in the principle of Justification by faith alone. Paul has demonstrated that the principle of faith does not have to lead to careless living.

Faith can establish obedience.

As Christians, we love the doctrine of Justification by faith alone because it humbles us and exalts God.

We also love this doctrine because it is precisely what we need: we have all fallen short of the glory of God. Without Justification by faith alone, we would have no hope of standing before our Holy God and receiving the blessing.

But we don't love Justification by Faith alone so that we can go on sinning as if our actions no longer matter. No, we believe that our faith leads us to obedience.

We strive to be like Abraham, who loved God even more than his only son.

We strive to have a heart like David, who passionately strove to love and obey God and to worship him alone.

What is it that motivated these men?

They did not believe that they were earning God's favor.

Paul will continue to unpack the mystery of true godliness.

May we all sit at his feet and bask in the glories of the gospel.

And may the result of our faith in the grace of God be growth in true obedience.

Amen!

