

Justification before Works: Romans 4:9-12

Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church

Sunday, November 4, 2012

We get to consider again this morning the blessing of the Gospel. Our God is so gracious and so good to us, that He made a way for hell-deserving sinners to inherit eternal life. That is Good News. That is a blessing that comes to us which we do not deserve. In response to this, we will sing God's praises forever. We will give Him thanks for His steadfast love to us.

One of the Psalms I read this week was Psalm 92, which opens like this: "It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy."

As we meditate on the glorious theological truths in the book of Romans, I hope that this will be the kind of response we have. I pray that we will think deeply about justification and imputation, and that we can understand the points the Apostle Paul makes in these chapters, and that we will then leap for joy and sing for joy at what God has done.

There are three things I want to talk about this morning. First of all, the blessing of justification. Second, Abraham and circumcision. And third, Abraham and the nations.

The Blessing of Justification

We are now in Romans 4, and Paul is explaining in great detail the truth that salvation comes by faith and not by works. He has stated this earlier in the letter. He stated the positive side of it already in the theme verses of the letter. 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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" So we already have the affirmation there that this righteousness from God comes to us by faith, by believing.

Then in 3:20 there is a negative statement concerning works. "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight." Justification is the act by which God declares a person to be righteous in His sight. And the Scriptures are

abundantly clear on this point, that this happens not by works, but by faith. God does not look at a person's good works, and on that basis declare him or her to be righteous. No! Rather, God looks at a person who trusts in Jesus, and on the basis of Jesus' righteousness God declares that individual to be righteous. Romans 3:28, then, summarizes the point, putting the positive and negative statements together. "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

What Paul is doing now in chapter 4 is looking back to Abraham in the Old Testament and showing that God has always saved people in this manner. Salvation has never been by works. It has always been by faith. Abraham is the perfect example here, especially because many of Paul's opponents were Jews who thought of Abraham as someone who was righteous by works. But Paul quotes and expounds Genesis 15:6 to show the error of that thinking and to show that God saved Abraham the same way He saves anyone—by faith. "Abraham *believed* God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

As I explained 2 weeks ago in Romans 4:1-8, there are two important aspects of God's work here. In justification, in God's act of declaring a person righteous, there are two transactions, two imputations. There is the imputation of righteousness, the crediting of righteousness. And there is the non-imputation of sin, there is forgiveness of sin. Righteousness is credited, and sin is not credited.

Let's review what we learned about this in verses 1-8. First, there is the crediting of righteousness. This is in the quotation from Genesis 15:6, and also in Paul's statements in verses 5-6. "And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, *his faith is counted as righteousness*, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom *God counts righteousness* apart from works." So there is the imputation of righteousness to those who believe.

And the other half of the equation is the non-reckoning of our sin. This is what the quotation from Psalm 32 emphasizes. "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom *the Lord will not count his sin*." That's the same word, whether it's translated "count" or "reckon" or "credit." One thing is counted as ours, even though it didn't come from us—that's righteousness. Another thing is not counted as ours, even though we did it—that's sin.

This is what we're talking about when we use the word imputation. We're talking about the crediting of our sin to Jesus Christ on the cross, and the crediting of His righteousness to us. This is the blessing for those who repent and believe.

Now the question comes in verse 9 concerning this blessing: "Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?" If faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness, which is what Paul has been saying, and he reiterates it again here in the second half of verse 9, then this is the next important question. What is the relationship between justification and circumcision?

Abraham and Circumcision

In the discussion of Abraham, this becomes an historical question and a temporal question. Which came first? Did righteousness by faith happen first? Or did circumcision happen first?

Let's make sure we understand the importance of this question. If circumcision came before justification, what might that imply? It could imply that circumcision is part of the basis of justification. If Abraham first had to be circumcised, and then later God counted him righteous, what would we conclude from that? We would conclude that circumcision is part of how a person gets right with God. You have to do this work. You have to perform this act of obedience as part of getting into a right relationship with God.

What else would be implied in this? If circumcision comes first, and then justification, then it would follow that only those who practice circumcision can be right with God. And who practices circumcision? The Jews. If circumcision is part of getting right with God, then only Jews (or those who become Jews) can be right with God.

This is the importance of the question. Is justification by faith alone apart from works of the law? Or is justification by works of the law, like circumcision? That's one piece of it. Then it's also a question of who this is for: is justification only for Jews, or for Gentiles also? Is it only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?

The Genesis Timeline

Let's go back to Genesis to see the timeline of these events in Abraham's life. We'll start in Genesis 12 where God first calls

Abram. This is before God changed Abram's name to Abraham. We'll see that in Genesis 17 in a moment.

In Abram's call, and when we look at how God worked in our own lives to save us, it should be clear that it was all by God's initiative. God came and got Abram, just like God came and got us. That's true of anyone who is saved. God called us to Himself. We weren't seeking for Him. We didn't come to Him. He came to us.

When God called Abram, it wasn't because Abram was a good man. It wasn't even because he had faith. He didn't have any credentials to commend him to God. God didn't receive a stack of resumes and decide that Abram was the most qualified to be the father of God's chosen people. Don't be mistaken. Nobody was qualified. Nobody deserved God's blessing. Abram was a sinner who deserved God's wrath and punishment. But God chose him in spite of his sin. God chose to bless him even though he was a sinner.

Listen to what Joshua 24 says about Abram. "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*. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many' (Joshua 24:2-3).

Do you see what that says about Abram? Abram was not seeking the true God. Abram was not worshiping and serving God. He had no faith in God. He was an idolater. He was a pagan. And God called Abram out of paganism. He called him out of his idolatrous lifestyle.

And the Lord made this amazing promise to this underserving man. The Lord said, "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. 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."

This is an early proclamation of the Gospel. The first Gospel message was in Genesis 3:15, where God said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." And that prophecy points ultimately to Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman, who defeats Satan. That's already foreshadowed in Genesis 3. And then we

come to Genesis 12, and we learn that the seed of the woman is also the seed of Abraham. In Galatians 3 we learn that the seed of Abraham is Christ, and we also learn that this verse in Genesis 12:3 is a Gospel message.

First of all, Galatians 3:8-9 “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” Then Galatians 3:16, “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.” So Christ is the seed of Abraham. And the last verse in Galatians 3 says, “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”

The Good News, the Gospel that was preached beforehand in Genesis 12:3, is that God is going to bless all the families of the earth, all the nations, all the ethnic groups in the world. And the spiritual blessing that is spreading throughout every tribe and language and people and nation is the blessing of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone. That’s the point that Paul is making in Galatians 3, as well as Romans 4. It’s by faith alone, not by works.

So the Gospel is in Genesis 12 where the Lord calls a pagan to Himself and gives him this amazing promise. Then we see the Gospel again in Genesis 15, which we looked at 2 weeks ago in our study of Romans 4:1-8. Genesis 15:6 is the key verse that Paul is expounding all through Romans 4. Abram “believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” That’s the great teaching of justification by faith alone, taught already in the very first book of the Bible.

So we’ve seen the call of Abram in Genesis 12 and the justification of Abram in Genesis 15. And now we can go to Genesis 17 which has the instructions about circumcision. At the beginning of Genesis 17 the Lord changes Abram’s name. Abram means “exalted father,” but here the Lord changes his name to Abraham, which means “father of a multitude.” That’s a fitting name, isn’t it, for a man who has received the promise of Genesis 12? In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. And your name will be, “father of a multitude.”

In Genesis 17 God gives Abraham a sign of the covenant, and the sign of this covenant is circumcision. In God’s covenant with Noah in Genesis 9, He promised that He would never flood the earth again to destroy it, and the sign of that covenant was the

rainbow. In the covenant that God made with Moses, He also gave a sign. In that case, it was the Sabbath. So there are signs attached to these different covenants. In God's covenant with Abraham, the sign is circumcision. God has already established His covenant with Abraham back in chapter 15. But now in chapter 17 He instructs Abraham concerning this sign of the covenant that will mark him and his descendants as God's people. The sign of circumcision is a way that God marks His people as His own.

In Genesis 17:11 God says, "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you." Then He gives instructions for how this should be carried out among all the males in his household.

The key point for Paul in our passage for this morning is the simple fact that Genesis 15 comes before Genesis 17. Abraham was justified by faith *before* he was circumcised. In Romans 4:10 Paul states it very clearly and emphatically: "it was not after, but before he was circumcised." He was counted righteous long before circumcision (29 years, according to the rabbis, between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17).

Therefore Abraham being circumcised could not have played any part in Abraham getting right with God. That's the point. Justification comes before works of any kind. Works play no part in our justification, but rather flow from justification.

And this also raises another question. If circumcision was not part of Abraham's justification, then what's the point of circumcision? Paul explains in verse 11. "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised."

He wasn't justified by circumcision. He was justified by faith. But circumcision was a sign and seal which God gave to him. Circumcision was a way that God set Abraham apart. Circumcision was a symbol of the righteousness which he had by faith.

There's a principle here that applies to the broader question of the relationship between justification and works. And this is why I entitled the sermon, "Justification before Works." Whether we're talking about circumcision in the Old Covenant, or now baptism in the New Covenant, or any other deed of obedience to God, all of these things follow justification. They are not part of our justification. They are signs and seals of the righteousness we have by faith. But no work is ever to be thought of as part of what makes us righteous.

Justification by faith comes first, then works flow from it (e.g., baptism, church attendance, Bible reading, prayer, ministry, evangelism, missions, service, kindness, etc.) Think of these as sign and seal. These are not what make you right with God, but they are the sign and seal which demonstrate you are right with God.

This has to be the case, because nobody truly does any good works until they are justified. It's only by faith that anyone can begin to deny sin and live to the glory of God. Apart from faith, apart from justification, any attempts to reform your life or clean up your life will just be substituting one sin for another. You may quite stealing, but continue to be filled with envy and hatred. You may suppress sexually immoral behavior, but you're filled with lust for money or possessions or power. You may even become very religious, very involved in church activities and knowledgeable in the Scriptures, but your heart is filled with spiritual pride.

Without faith, there are no truly good deeds. The powerful implication from all this is that you cannot clean up your life in order to get right with God. It doesn't work that way. That's exactly backwards. You must not put any hope in your ability to do good deeds in order to make God happy with you. That's insane. One, because a person is justified by faith and not by works. And two, because you don't even have any good works until you have faith. Faith is the key. Faith is fundamental. Faith comes before any good works, because the good works are a fruit of faith.

So if you're here this morning and you're thinking, "There's no way God could accept me as I am right now; my life is such a mess I don't even have any business being here in church; sometime I'll get around to improving my behavior, and then maybe I can get right with God." If that's your thinking, I want you to see the radical truth of the Gospel. What you need to do is believe! Don't worry about trying to do religious rituals. Don't worry about trying to do good deeds. Look to Jesus, who hung on the cross for our sin. Look to Him, and believe!

And then everything will change. But until you believe, nothing fundamentally will ever change. Because justification comes before works. Works don't come before justification. Works don't bring about justification. Justification by faith happens first, and then comes obedience.

The Sign Must Be Accompanied by Faith

In verse 12 Paul makes another point about circumcision. He shows that mere physical circumcision, apart from faith, is nothing. Abraham is the father of the circumcised, referring to the Jews. But then Paul qualifies that, “the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.”

As we’ve seen, faith comes before the sign and seal. And here’s a related point: the sign and seal only counts if it is accompanied by faith. This verse is about the Jews. The acknowledgement is that there are ethnic Jews who may have the physical sign, but do not have the spiritual reality.

The same is true in churches today. There are plenty of people who claim to be Christians, who have been baptized, who participate in many church functions. But if there’s no faith, then they are not part of Abraham’s family.

Justification by faith is prior to obedience. It’s what produces obedience. It’s what drives us to fight against sin and pursue holiness. And any outward actions that may look like obedience don’t count for anything if there’s not faith—if your sins are not covered by the blood of Jesus and if you’re not counted righteous in Christ. Justification by faith alone is essential. It’s kind of like the engine of a car. The engine is absolutely essential. The engine is what makes the car do what it’s supposed to do. And if someone tried to sell you a car without an engine, even if it had a new paint job, you would say, No way! These are the kind of things Paul is saying about justification by faith alone. The externals are empty and powerless and meaningless if this one essential thing is missing—justification by faith alone.

In Charles Wesley’s hymn, “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” which we sang earlier in the service, the third verse begins like this: “he breaks the power of cancelled sin.” Do you see how that connects with what we’re talking about here? The only sin you can have victory over is cancelled sin, forgiven sin. You cannot make the slightest progress in overcoming sin and becoming holy, unless first your sins are forgiven. You have to be justified by faith first. And then the fight of faith begins, and the fruit of faith blossoms. The power of sin is broken once it is cancelled—once it is forgiven and no longer held against you.

Abraham and the Nations

The last point, very briefly in closing, is to see the connection between Abraham and the nations. Abraham is the father of the nations. As we saw in Genesis 17, the Lord changed Abram's name to Abraham, meaning "father of a multitude." And the promise of Genesis 12 was that in Abram all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

In our passage, in Romans 4:11, Paul draws out the important implication of the fact that Abraham was justified before he was circumcised. He writes in the second half of verse 11, "The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well."

This is the great news of the Gospel, proclaimed all the way back in Genesis. Salvation is by faith alone, not by works, not by rituals, not by ethnicity. You don't have to become a Jew to be saved. You don't have to be circumcised to be saved. You don't have to clean up your life to be saved. You simply have to acknowledge your need for a Savior, and cast yourself on Jesus.

That's the Good News we can proclaim to anyone and everyone we meet. We shouldn't ever think to ourselves, "Those folks seem to be pretty moral, they seem to have their lives together, they vote the same way I do, their kids are well-behaved—therefore they would probably make really good Christians. Whereas those other folks, they have real problems, they are *really* lost, they have really different views on things, they're immoral—therefore I won't bother sharing the Gospel with them because they probably wouldn't want to hear it anyway." We must never think that way.

Whenever you're tempted to think that way, remember Abraham. Whatever those folks are like, whom you're reluctant to evangelize—picture Abraham as just like them. A total pagan, worshiping other gods, with no inclination toward the true God. But the Lord came and got ahold of his life and said, I'm going to bless you, and through you I'm going to bless every people group in the world.

We serve an amazing God. We serve a compassionate God. We serve a missionary God. And we get to be on mission with Him in the world, as He draws to Himself His elect, the children of Abraham, from all the families of the earth.

I want to close with a prayer for the spread of the Gospel worldwide. There are many families of the earth who have not yet heard the Gospel. And there are many places where our brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow children of Abraham, are being persecuted for sharing the Gospel. And there are those who are connected with our church who are living overseas or heading overseas, and we want to pray for them as well.