

Romans 4:1-8
OT Examples of Justified Sinners

Abraham stands out as a very important individual in the Old Testament

- The LORD initiated a covenant with this man
- This covenant would affect every nation on the Earth

The Jews obviously had a tremendously high view of Abraham

- In some cases, they had too high of a view of him

Having studied through Genesis recently, we should be somewhat familiar with the story of Abraham

- Genesis devotes a considerable amount of time to the life of this man

Paul was a Jewish believer

- So it shouldn't surprise us that he references Abraham in the book of Romans
- But the manner in which Paul uses the example of Abraham shocks some unbelieving Jews

As Paul continues to unfold the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the apostle goes back in the Old Covenant to prove that his doctrine is not a new doctrine¹

- Rather, it has been God's means of saving sinners from the very beginning

Paul can think of no better person to use as an example of a justified sinner than Abraham

- The apostle references Abraham by name seven times in Romans 4 alone

Let's read Romans 4:1-8

For the Jews, Abraham was their poster child

- He was their physical ancestor
- They prided themselves on being his physical children

The Jews also prided themselves on being the spiritual children of Abraham

- But they had some misconceptions about how this was accomplished

What was the relationship between justification and Abraham?

- For Paul, there was a very close connection between these two

In Romans 4:1-8, Paul highlights three results that take place in the life of every born-again believer as a result of justification by faith alone

- Justification by faith alone eliminates the potential for boasting (4:1-2)
- Justification by faith alone promotes the gift of grace (4:3-5)
- Justification by faith alone imparts the blessing of forgiveness (4:6-8)

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *NAC, Vol 27*, 121.

I. Justification by faith alone eliminates the potential for boasting (4:1-2)

¹What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?

It's not uncommon for the apostle Paul to begin a discussion by asking a question

- He does that here in Romans 4:1

In the latter half of Romans 3, Paul has established the premise of justification by faith alone

- It is apart from the Law (3:21, 28)
- It was witnessed by the Law and the Prophets (3:21)
- It is appropriated through faith for all who believe (3:22)
- It is given as a gift of God's grace (3:24)
- It excludes boasting (3:27)
- It includes both Jews and Gentiles (3:29-30)
- It establishes the Law (3:31)

What Paul does in Romans 4 is reference Abraham as an example of one who was justified by faith alone

- In Paul's mind, Abraham was the prime illustration of how God pronounced a sinner righteous through faith alone

Abraham was revered by the Jews as their forefather

- His life and character were held up as the model and standard of how God would deal with others²

Some Jewish teachers considered Abraham to be the only righteous man of his generation³

- Consequently, this is why God chose him

Listen to what some Jewish writings said about Abraham⁴

- The Prayer of Manasseh 8, "Therefore thou, O Lord, God of the righteous, has not appointed repentance for the righteous, for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who did not sin against thee, but thou hast appointed repentance for me, who am a sinner"
- The Book of Jubilees, dating around the 2nd century B.C. – "Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life" (23:10)
- Another Jewish writing, "Our father Abraham became the heir of this and of the coming world simply by the merit of the faith with which he believed in the Lord; as it is written, 'He believed in the Lord, who counted it to him as righteousness'"
- "no one has been found like him in glory" (Sir. 44:19)⁵
- It was even argued that Abraham obeyed the Law perfectly, even before it was given! (Kidd. 4:14)⁶

This sampling of some Jewish writings is sufficient to show that they had some exaggerated view of Abraham's standing before God

- The Jewish rabbis taught that Abraham was justified on the basis of something that he had done

² Douglas J. Moo, *NICNT, Romans*, 256.

³ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Romans*, 145.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁵ Moo, 256.

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 195.

Since the Jews traced their lineage from Abraham, they believed that justification was on the basis of works as well

- So Paul's argumentation was critical

If Paul could prove that Abraham was justified by faith alone, then this would remove the temptation to look to works as the basis by which God declares a sinner righteous

- This would be a deathblow to the Jewish misconceptions regarding Abraham

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

For the sake of argumentation, Paul temporarily assumes that Abraham was justified by works

- He assumes the position of the Jews to show a logical conclusion

If Abraham was, in fact, justified by works, Paul says that Abraham "has something to boast about, but not before God"

- If Abraham's righteous standing was somehow dependent upon something he had done, then there would be room for boasting

But the problem is that Romans 3:27 has excluded all boasting

- Salvation is a Divine gift of grace
- It is not something that we deserve or earn

Abraham couldn't have boasted of what he had done in salvation

- And if Abraham couldn't boast, then no one can!

Paul has taken his first step toward demolishing the Jewish misconceptions surrounding Abraham

- He has shown that not even Abraham had cause for boasting before God

Any of us could be tempted to boast when we look at our lives

- We could compare ourselves to others and think that we are better than another person

We could even look at where we are now and think, "God must have seen something in me that was worthy of saving."

- If we begin to have those kinds of thoughts, we are on a slippery road toward spiritual pride

Romans 1:18-3:20 has shown in graphic detail just how sinful we are

- No one can claim to be righteous or better than another sinner
- We are all guilty, condemned, and fully deserving of God's wrath and judgment

Not even Abraham could boast before God

- And if he couldn't boast, neither can we

Justification by faith alone eliminates the potential for boasting

- **But it also...**

II. Justification by faith alone promotes the gift of grace (4:3-5)

³ For what does the Scripture say?

The apostle Paul has made the claim that Abraham had no cause for boasting

- But how could he prove this?
- What could Paul possibly say to convince the Jews that they were wrong in their estimation of their physical forefather?

Paul takes the Jew back to the Old Testament

- The apostle shows the Jews that Scripture is clear on this issue of justification by faith

So what Scripture reference does Paul use with the Jews?

- Of all the Scriptures available to him, which one would he choose?
- Which would you choose?

Paul goes all the way back to Genesis 15:6

- This is the clearest Old Testament text on the issue of justification by faith alone
- And it involved Abraham

“AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

It is so simple, isn't it?

- Yet the Jews drastically misunderstood this verse

The Jews thought that Abraham somehow merited or deserved his righteous standing with God

- But this was a huge misinterpretation of this pivotal text from Genesis

In Genesis 12, the LORD appeared to Abram, saying, "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'" (Ge 12:1-3)

Have you ever wondered why the LORD chose Abram?

- What did Abram do that caused God to choose Him?
- *Absolutely nothing!*

Abram came from Ur of the Chaldeans⁷

- The Chaldeans were a pagan group, believing in many different gods
- This certainly didn't cause God to choose Abram

When God told Abram to leave his homeland and travel to Canaan, did he obey perfectly?

- No
- Disobedience never brings about God's favor

In Genesis 15, the LORD appeared to Abram again, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great" (15:1)

⁷ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur NT Commentary, Romans 1-8*, 235.

Abram was fully set on appointing Eliezer as his heir

- But God told Abram that a child from his own loins would be the heir

The LORD took Abram outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be'" (Ge 15:5)

- God promised that Abram would have innumerable descendants

Then the pivotal verse is mentioned, "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Ge 15:6)

What brought about Abram's righteous standing?

- The Law?
 - o No!
 - o Abram lived hundreds of years before the Law was given
- Circumcision?
 - o No!
 - o Abram was uncircumcised at this time
- Perfect obedience?
 - o No!
 - o We have already seen Abram being disobedient

What brought about Abram's righteous standing with God?

- His faith alone

This was the first time that the word "believe" was used in Scripture

- It is not accidental that it is used in connection with the attaining of righteousness⁸

Abram was justified by faith alone

- Not by the Law
- Not by circumcision
- Not by perfect obedience

In Galatians 3:6-7, Paul writes, "Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham" (Ga 3:6-7)

There is not one word in Genesis 15:6 about Abraham's work or merit

- The emphasis is totally on his faith

That is exactly what the apostle Paul is telling the Jews in Romans 4!

- Abram's simple faith was reckoned as righteousness

The word for "reckoned" is an extremely important word

- It occurs 11 times in Romans 4
- It occurs 5 times in Romans 4:1-8, the passage we are studying this morning

⁸ Moo, 261.

“reckon” was a mathematical term, oftentimes used in the keeping of accounts⁹

- It meant “to put to one’s account”¹⁰ or “to credit something to another’s account”¹¹
- It implies the addition of something that does not belong to him¹²

For those of us who don’t have our paychecks directly deposited into a bank account, we have to take that check to a local bank ourselves

- We fill out our deposit form, put our account number on the form, sign our check, and give it to a bank teller

The teller will then deposit those funds into our account

- We will have that money credited toward our account

When Abraham believed, a spiritual transaction took place

- God credited Abraham’s spiritual account with “righteousness”

Before conversion, Abraham’s account read “guilty”

- He was spiritually bankrupt

But after conversion, Abraham’s account read “righteous”

- He was no longer bankrupt
- And he was spiritually rich!

So if we are going to consider the topic of justification by faith alone, Paul would have us look at the example of Abraham himself

- His life clearly shows that God declared him righteous on the basis of faith alone

But some Jews would look at Abraham’s faith and attribute some merit to it

- However, even the gift of faith cannot be a source of human merit or pride
- We can’t even take credit for the faith that we have to trust in God

Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us that every aspect of salvation – including faith – is a gift from God

The Jews obviously knew about Genesis 15:6

- But they tended to interpret that verse in light of other verses

For example, they would point to a verse like Genesis 26:5, “Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws”

- In their view, God declared Abraham righteous because he was obedient to God’s commands

So Jews would take Genesis 26:5 and use it to interpret a verse that occurred many chapters – and many years - prior

- There are obvious problems with this approach to Scripture interpretation

Abraham’s obedience was the fruit of his righteous standing with God

- It was not the basis for his justification¹³

⁹ Morris, 197.

¹⁰ Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God’s Grace*, 113.

¹¹ MacArthur, 237.

¹² Moo, 262.

¹³ F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale NT Commentaries, Romans*, 105.

⁴ Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due.

A simple analogy is given in verses 4-5

- It shows the utter incompatibility of being justified by works with God's grace

Those of us who are still working know the truth of this verse

- We all know what we should expect when our paychecks are handed out

Suppose that your employer has promised to pay you \$1000/week

- At the end of a two week pay period, you shouldn't be shocked to find \$2000
- Minus the normal withholdings

Your employer isn't giving you a gift

- He is giving you what is due for your labor
- You earned that paycheck

Granted, God gave you the physical strength and stamina to perform your duties

- But you also had a part in being faithful and diligent in your job

Working for one's salvation has never been the way of salvation

- The reward of righteousness is never contingent upon what we do
- Righteousness is given exclusively on the basis of what God has done for us

"God is never obliged by his creatures; justification is a gift, freely bestowed, not a wage, justly earned"¹⁴

- God is never compelled or required to save anyone

No one can stand before God and demand righteousness, thinking that he has somehow earned it

This is because no one is worthy of being saved!

- All are unrighteous
- All are equally deserving of eternal condemnation

⁵ But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.

On the flipside of verse 4, what happens to the person who doesn't work?

- Should that person expect a paycheck?

What if I were to walk into your place of employment and ask your boss, "Where is my check?"

- Your boss may tell me, "Sir, I am sorry, but you don't work here. We don't have a check for you!"

Paul's analogy is very clear and easy to understand

- It illustrates the spiritual truth behind justification by faith alone

If a person attempts to work for his justification, then God's grace has been nullified

- You receive what you deserve

¹⁴ Moo, 263.

But if a person doesn't work for his justification and simply trusts in God, then God's grace is seen to be operative

- As the end of verse 5 states, "**his faith is reckoned as righteousness**"

These verses cannot be used to promote spiritual laziness

- We are to be diligent in obeying what God has revealed in Scripture

But no amount of work can coerce God into saving anyone

- We are justified by faith – not by works

There we have that word "**reckoned**" again

- Justification isn't 99% God, 1% man
- Justification is 100% God

Let's not skip over an extremely significant phrase here in verse 5, "**Him who justifies the ungodly**"

- "**ungodly**" is a strong term, signifying the depth of human sinfulness
- In a backhanded way, this term encompasses the life of Abraham

F.F. Bruce says that God's act of justifying the ungodly is "**the greatest of all his wonders**"¹⁵

- Creation and resurrection are manifestations of God's power
- But declaring sinners righteous is a manifestation of God's grace

The OT speaks against judges who "**justify the wicked for a bribe**" (Isa 5:23)

- Proverbs 17:15 issues forth this warning, "**He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD**"

Yet, this passage tells us that God "**justifies the ungodly**"

- Is God guilty of contradicting Himself?
- Certainly not!

God doesn't simply turn a blind eye to sin

- God doesn't allow sin to go unpunished

Through the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus Christ, God can declare sinners righteous

- Their sins were atoned for on the cross of Calvary

The ungodly have their sins atoned for by Christ

- Then, they are declared righteous
- They are given a new status

Have you come to a point in your life when you understand yourself to be "**ungodly**"?

- Do you see yourself as spiritually unable to save yourself?¹⁶

The Scriptures don't tell of us God justifying

- Church members
- Bible teachers
- Fervent prayers

¹⁵ Bruce, 106.

¹⁶ William R. Newell, *Romans: Verse-by-Verse*, 133.

No, the Bible is clear – God “**justifies the ungodly**”

Jesus stated His purpose in coming to Earth, "**I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance**" (Lk 5:32)

Justification by faith alone promotes the gift of grace

- This grand doctrine glorifies God since He declares righteous those who were previously unbelieving and undeserving

Grace isn't fully appreciated when we have a part in the process

- Grace is fully appreciated when we cast ourselves entirely upon God's mercy

Justification by faith alone

- **Eliminates the potential for boasting (4:1-2)**
- **Promotes the gift of grace (4:3-5)**

III. Justification by faith alone imparts the blessing of forgiveness (4:6-8)

⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

In proving his point about justification by faith alone, Paul not only uses the example of Abraham

- He also uses the example of David

Now Abraham and David are two of the biggest names, from a Jewish standpoint, in the Old Testament

- Both are used to assist the apostle Paul in Romans 4

Abraham lived before the giving of the Law

- David, however, lived under the Law

Abraham was not known as a flagrant sinner

- David, however, was an adulterer and murderer¹⁷

Yet both of these men were declared righteous in the sight of God

- Solely on the basis of faith alone

With Abraham, Paul goes back to Genesis 15:6

- This was a crucial passage when dealing with the Jews

With David, however, Paul goes to Psalm 32:1-2

- This was a psalm that identifies itself as a psalm of David
- So these words were from the very pen of David himself

"A Psalm of David. A Maskil. How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!" (Ps 32:1-2)

¹⁷ Alan F. Johnson, *Everyman's Bible Commentary, Romans*, 83.

David penned these words out of his own experience

- He had sinned greatly against the Lord
 - o Adultery with Bathsheba
 - o Murder of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband and David's faithful warrior
- But he had been forgiven by the Lord

This certainly is a precious psalm, highlighting the blessings of forgiveness

- But why does Paul use this psalm in proving his point about justification by faith alone?

Listen to Romans 4:6 again, "**just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works**" (emphasis mine)

- There we have that word "**reckons**" again
- But it is used in a different manner in this verse

With Abraham, Paul highlighted the fact that God "**reckoned**" righteousness on the basis of faith alone

- Positively, Abraham was given something that he didn't deserve

With David, Paul highlights the fact that God does not reckon sin to our account

- David was not given something that he did deserve

⁷ "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED."

Paul goes on to describe in greater detail the blessing that exists for born-again believers

- "**those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven**"
- Those "**whose sins have been covered**"

This can only be accomplished through the work and ministry of Jesus Christ

- "**Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!**" (Jn 1:29)

The psalmist describes the vastness of God's forgiveness, "**As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us**" (Ps 103:12)

- Aren't you glad that God doesn't use our sin against us?

The unbeliever is perpetually guilty about his sin

- The believer, on the other hand, experiences forgiveness and enjoys peace and restored fellowship with God

⁸ "BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT."

Furthermore, it is a tremendous blessing from the LORD that He "**will not take into account**" our sin

- This is yet another instance of the repeated verb "**reckon**"
- It is translated differently in our English Bibles, but it is the same Greek word

Being declared righteous is far more than mere forgiveness

- Justification includes forgiveness, but is far more¹⁸

¹⁸ W.H. Griffith-Thomas, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 131.

A judge may choose not to send a thief to prison

- That is forgiveness
- But that individual is still a criminal

But God, through justifying a sinner, achieves much more

- He forgives the criminal's sin
- But he also declares that criminal to be righteous

As we anticipate some future references from Romans, consider the effects of justification

- "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ro 5:1)
- "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Ro 8:1)

So with these two OT giants – Abraham and David – we have both sides of justification clearly stated

- Although sinners by nature, God declares us righteous on the basis of faith alone
- Although we deserve to be eternally condemned, God does not impute our sin to our account

On the one hand, we are declared “not guilty”

- On the other hand, we are declared “righteous”

Beloved, this is the beauty of justification

- And it is appropriated simply by faith alone

This, indeed, is a great blessing!

- Psalm 32:1-2 should bring tremendous encouragement to each believer here this morning

Jesus told a parable "to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted" (Lk 18:9-14)

The contrast couldn't be clearer, right?

- The Pharisee thought that he was righteous because of his religious works
- The tax collector thought of himself as “the sinner” – clearly dependent upon God's grace and mercy

But in the end, it doesn't matter what we think of ourselves

- What matters the most is what God thinks of us

God speaks of the tax collector as being “justified”

- God declared this social outcast “righteous” in the sight of God
- By faith alone, totally separated from works

I wonder which one of these two individuals describes you this morning

- The Pharisee?
 - Self-righteous
 - Proud
 - Quick to tell others of your spiritual accomplishments
 - Grateful that you aren't like other sinful people
 - Boasting to God about what you do for Him

- Or the tax collector?
 - Humbled by your sin
 - Undeserving of God's grace and mercy
 - Thinking of yourself as the worst sinner that you know

How about it, my friend?

- Are you righteous in God's sight?

If you think that you are righteous in the sight of God, on what basis have you come to this conclusion?

- By something you have done?
- By something God has done for you?