

Christ Justifies the Ungodly

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Bible Text: Romans 4:1-8; Psalm 32:1-5

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Romans chapter four and the first eight verses. Hear God's Word.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."¹

May God be pleased to bless to us the reading of his Word.

Let's pray together.

Father in heaven, we are glad, glad to be assembled together as your people, glad to sing your praise, glad to read your Word. We pray, now, that your gospel arrows prepared will be directed at our hearts and through your Word we might be convicted and convinced further of the great truths of your Word and we might by your grace trust Jesus Christ, the one who justifies the ungodly. Be pleased to bless us to this end and be pleased to give us your grace we pray in the good name of Jesus who is the Lord. Amen.

When I checked my email about 10 days ago there was an email from a fellow pastor. That is not unusual. But when I read the few lines in the email and saw that there was an attachment, some dismay rose in my heart. I opened the attachment and learned that a pastor to whom I had administered vows of ordination several years ago in an ordination service had defected to Eastern Orthodoxy. He had repudiated the vows that he had taken in the denomination in which he took those vows and embraced another religion.

¹ Romans 4:1-8

It wasn't altogether surprising to me because of this pastor's particular orientation towards worship and the sense that he had of the importance of the pastor. I would even say the exaltation of the pastor. But in another sense it did surprise me because his defecting to Eastern Orthodoxy was a repudiation of the Reformation doctrine of justification by grace alone through Christ alone through faith alone. It was an embracing of a doctrine contrary to the apostle Paul, contrary to Christ, and contrary to the reformation churches. It was an embracing of a doctrine which indicates that one must believe in Jesus Christ but that faith must be accompanied by good works added to that faith. Both faith and good works form a foundation for right standing with God.

This is the doctrine against which Paul so vehemently teaches in the book of Galatians. This is the doctrine against which Paul so vehemently teaches in the book of Romans. This is the doctrine against which Paul so firmly stands in our text: that faith and works are contrary to one another and that men and women must come to God only on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ, the one who justifies the ungodly. And this is the teaching of our text in Romans chapter four and the first few verses: that you must come to Jesus Christ and I must come to Jesus Christ by faith. You must trust Jesus Christ, the one who justifies the ungodly.

This is the teaching of Scripture. This is the Word of God to you and to me. Trust Jesus Christ, the one who justifies the ungodly.

In our text we see Paul plainly putting works and faith in juxtaposition. Look with me, if you would, at verses four and five.

Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.²

There you see it very plainly: works and faith opposed to each other.

In verse four Paul is dealing with a general principle. "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due."³ And you know this is the case. If you have employment, you have agreed with your employer that you will perform certain tasks and duties. You will perform certain work and in return he will give you a certain amount of money. You expect that this will be the case. It is not a favor granted on the part of the employer to give you what is due for the work you performed. It is very simple.

Paul deals with this, now, in relationship to God. "The one who works." The one who works often might be the individual who does go to his daily job or cleans house or goes to school, but at the end of the day, at the end of the day at work, at the end of the day in the household, at the end of the day at school, you may, that individual may, pat himself

² Romans 4:4-5

³ Romans 4:4

or herself on the back and say, “What a good person I am. God will accept me. God will smile on me because I have done my duty.”

It reminds me of a fellow at school—I have mentioned this to some of you—a fellow at school who said to me in class one day, “Professor, if I complete all of my work and do my assignments successfully will you give me extra credit?”

I don’t think so. When you signed up for this class you agreed to do a specific amount of work and in return for properly accomplishing that work you get an appropriate grade. That is the deal that you made. And I reminded the young man of what Jesus said to those who indicated that they had performed their duty. Jesus’ response to them was: “So? You have performed your duty. You ought to say, ‘I am an unprofitable servant because I have simply performed my duty.’”

You don’t make points with God. This is what Paul is attempting to say to us. “Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.”⁴ The word “favor” in our text is actually, interestingly enough, the word “grace.” You see, it is not grace on the part of the employer to give you what you are due. Works are opposed to grace. Works oppose faith.

In verse five, now, Paul gives the opposite. He takes the opposite side of the case. “But to the one who does not work...”⁵ Now, let me run a little red flag up the pole here. This doesn’t mean that you can ignore your responsibilities at the office or your responsibilities at school or your responsibilities at home. This is not what Paul is talking about. Paul is very specifically talking about putting God under obligation. That is what he has in mind here. And in actuality, you see, it is impossible for you and me to put God under obligation.

In Romans chapter 11, for example, the apostle says in verse 35, quoting from the book of Job, “Or who has first given to him,” that is, given to God, “that it might be paid back to him again?”⁶ “Who is it?” God says to Job. And Paul quotes this text, “Who is it that can put me,” God says, “in debt? Who is it that can put me in the position of owing something?” And the rhetorical question begs the answer, “No one.” And that is the point, you see. No one can actually put God in debt.

Look again at Romans four and verse five, “but to the one who does not work...”⁷ Paul refers to the one who says, “Am I going to put God under obligation to me? No, this is impossible.” “But to the one who does not work,” and Paul goes on to say, “but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly...”⁸ Rather than attempting to put God under obligation, your posture is that you believe in the one who justifies the ungodly.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Romans 4:5

⁶ Romans 11:35

⁷ Romans 4:5

⁸ Ibid.

Now a little station identification is in order here. Who are the ungodly? People like you and me. We are the ungodly. This is part of what we need to understand. It is part of what you need to understand. To be godly is to be like God. To be godly is to be like Christ.

Do you remember Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane? When the mob came, Christ was arrested through the instrumentality of that kiss Judas planted on the Savior. Not a little aggravated, not a little angry, Peter drew his sword and, whoosh, swinging that sword at the servant of the high priest, he cut off his ear. The tension was rising, I would guess, in that particular scene. But Jesus, not of the posture of anger, inexorably moving toward the cross, took the ear severed from the head of the servant of the high priest, maybe even picking it up off the ground, replaced that ear and healed the servant of the high priest. I think often we are more like Peter than we are like Christ. You see, in the text we are the ungodly. We are the ones too often motivated by anger.

And what does the text say? Lo and behold, verse five, the ungodly are justified. The text speaks of those who “believe in him who justifies the ungodly.” The ungodly are justified before God.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism has a very nice definition of justification. “Justification is the act of free God’s grace wherein he pardons all of our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only by the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”⁹

This justification, this right standing with God, involves forgiveness, a forgiveness of all of our sins, all of your sins and all of my sins. That’s one side of it. Think about that. Every sin forgiven; every sin covered.

And on the other side, justification involves the free gift of the righteousness of Christ. Christ not only died on that cross to pay the penalty due to folks like us for sin, but he lived a perfect life. He lived a perfect life for you and me. And his life, his good life, his good deeds, his righteousness, the good things that he did, are given to us as a free gift.

That is what justification is about, the removal of sin and the gift of righteousness, the gift of the good life of Christ.

And our text, again, says, in verse five, “But to the one who does not work, but *believes* in Him who justifies the ungodly...”¹⁰ There is faith. And this faith is not just a quantity of something that you can carry around. You can’t take a milk jug and label it faith and then fill it up and say, “Oh, I’ve got faith.” We sometimes think that faith involves a quantity of something, something that we can put our hands around. I think we get that idea from the words of Jesus when he tells the disciples that they have little faith. He says to them, “Oh, ye of little faith.”¹¹ But what Jesus is talking about is the weakness of their

⁹ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Answer 33.

¹⁰ Romans 4:5.

¹¹ Matthew 6:30, 8:26, 16,8; Luke 12:28

faith. He has reference to the strength of their faith. Their faith is not strong. He is not talking about a quantity of faith.

In addition, when you look at the text, you see faith cannot be taken as something that stands alone. The text speaks of faith “in him who justifies the ungodly.” Faith always has an object. Faith cannot stand alone. You may sing, “Only believe, only believe. All things are possible, only believe.” Your song implies faith is something that you can gin up yourself and if you have enough of it you will be OK. This is not proper. Faith always has an object. It is faith *in him* who justifies the ungodly.

Now in verse five we come to this final clause in the verse which often times gives us a little bit of trouble. “His faith is credited as righteousness.”¹² Well, we have already mentioned this idea of righteousness. This is the good life of Jesus Christ. These are the good things that Jesus Christ has done for the likes of us. And this word “credited” often gives us a little knot between the ears. We don’t always get it correctly.

But I think the best way to *think* about this word “credited” is with the word “think.” You see, the root of this word is really logic or thought. And so amazingly, friends, when you trust Christ what does God do? He thinks of you as righteous, not because there is any righteousness innate within you, but because of the good gift of the righteousness that he gives you in Jesus Christ. And so He thinks of you as righteous. He considers you to be righteous. Praise God that this is the case. You see, ungodly as we are in our thoughts and in our conduct, through faith in Jesus Christ he thinks of us, he considers us to be righteous. What a wonderful thing that is and what a wonderful gift God is pleased to give us. And so it says, “His faith is credited as righteousness.”

Now how do we put this together? Well, I think you have to understand something about faith. You see, when you stand before God you have nothing. You have nothing to offer God. There is nothing within you. There is no merit within you. There is nothing, absolutely nothing that you can offer to God.

I remember a hand going up in an evening church service when I said this to the congregation that I formerly served. I acknowledged the hand. “I see that hand.” And the man said to me, “But I do have something to offer to God, my faith. I have my faith to offer to God.” I responded, “Hold it just a minute. Is this faith, then, something you offer to God that puts God under obligation?” You see, that can’t be. If this is your posture, you are translating this faith into a work of sorts. So that can’t be.

Furthermore, your faith in actuality is an acknowledgement of your emptiness. That is what faith is about. Faith is an acknowledgement of your emptiness and faith, furthermore, is an acknowledgement of the fullness of Christ. And so when you believe in Christ, you are acknowledging the fact, “I am empty. I have nothing to offer to God. I have nothing to bring to God. Only Jesus Christ is satisfactory. Only the merits of Jesus Christ are good enough.” And so when I believe in the one who justifies the ungodly I

¹² Ibid.

am placing faith in Jesus Christ and I am saying, “I have nothing to offer and Jesus Christ is everything.” That is what I am saying.

Now I would like you to connect this with verse six. Look at verse six. “Just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.”¹³ Did you catch that? “Just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom *God credits righteousness apart from works.*”¹⁴ You see, when you trust in Jesus Christ, the transaction is simple. God credits you with righteousness. God thinks of you as righteous. That is the idea. And so the words in verse five, “His faith is credited as righteousness,”¹⁵ are equivalent to “God credits righteousness” in verse six.

Let me put it this way. You often speak of justification by faith. What does that mean? Well, it simply means justification by Christ. That is what it means, justification by Christ. Why? On one hand, you acknowledge your emptiness and, on the other hand, you acknowledge the fullness of Christ. And so justification by faith is justification by Christ. In like manner, “faith credited as righteousness” means “God credits righteousness.” That’s what it means. And it seems to me it is very plain in the text.

Now, all of this seems, on one hand, a little academic. It seems abstract and theoretical. We have these truths. We have these statements of doctrine. But you have to understand this is not just abstract truth. This is personal. This is very personal. This is why Paul gives us a couple of examples. We started with David here; so let’s continue on with David in verse six. “Just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.”¹⁶ So God speaks about the blessing on the man, or David speaks of the blessing on the man, to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. You will notice Paul now quotes from Psalm 32. This is David. These are David’s words. David confesses,

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.¹⁷

God does not take into account lawless deeds. God does not consider sins. This is a blessing. Blessed is the person whose sins are forgiven. Blessed is the person whose sins are covered by the blood of Jesus Christ. As a result, blessed is the person whose sins the Lord does not take into account.

This was not just academic for David. This was David’s personal experience. I would like you to go back to Psalm 32 in your Bibles. Would you go there with me? You see at the very beginning of Psalm 32 the words Paul quotes.

¹³ Romans 4:6

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Romans 4:5

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Romans 4:7-8

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!¹⁸

David understood those words. David understood the forgiveness of his sin. It is very likely that this psalm was penned in light of his sin with Bathsheba when he committed adultery with this woman. And not only did he commit adultery with this woman, but he sinned against Uriah, her husband. David called Uriah in from the battle front and said to Uriah, “Go spend some time with your wife and enjoy the company of your wife for a time.”

David’s motive was to cover up his sin. But Uriah said, “Time out, time out, King David. The army is on the battle front and Joab and all of the generals are out there on the battle front. Should I have pleasure with my wife and with my family in my household when my compatriots are out on the battlefield? I’ll not do it.”

And so David thought for a moment and he said, “OK.” And he sent Uriah with a letter back out on the battle front, a letter to Joab. Joab’s directions were, “Put Uriah on the front of the line. Put him out there in the most dangerous part of the battle and then withdraw from him so that the enemy will get him.”

In this way David conspired to have Uriah killed. He not only violated the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,”¹⁹ but he also violated the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder.”²⁰ He did these dastardly, ungodly deeds. He was the ungodly one, you see, in this context.

And then we read on in the song.

When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long. For day and night
Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.²¹

God’s hand was heavy on David because of his sin. David felt the sting of his sin. But he was unwilling to confess that sin until Nathan the prophet came and pointed his finger at David and he said, “You are the man, David. You are the sinner.”²² Then David broke.

And the psalm goes on. “I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity
I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD; And
You forgave the guilt of my sin.’”²³

¹⁸ Psalm 32:1-2

¹⁹ Exodus 20:14

²⁰ Exodus 20:13

²¹ Psalm 32:3-4

²² See 2 Samuel 12:7

²³ Psalm 32:5

David says, "You forgave that murder. You forgave that adultery, God. You forgave me."

You see, this wasn't abstract academic truth for David. He knew the forgiveness of God. And he understood forgiveness not just as a concept in his head. In the depths of his heart and in the belly of his being he understood the forgiveness of God. Not only so, Paul indicates that David also received the gift of righteousness from God. Look back again at Romans 4:6, "David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works." Then Paul quotes Psalm 32:1. David received forgiveness for all his sins. And David received the gift of righteousness. How so? He believed the One who justifies the ungodly.

Paul also gives us the example of Abraham. Look at the first three verses of Romans chapter four.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."²⁴

Like David, Abraham believed the one who justifies the ungodly. That is what Abraham did. And it was credited to him as righteousness. That is, Abraham received forgiveness and he received the gift of righteousness.

Would you go back with me to Genesis 15 for just a moment and look at the text there? Genesis 15. We heard it read earlier.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"²⁵

God had earlier said to Abram, "In you and in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed."²⁶ And now Abraham, confounded by the promise, says to God, "What are you going to do? I am childless? And this man who I put over my estate, he will be my heir and his children will receive my household." All this is very personal, you see.

Verse four.

Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward

²⁴ Romans 4:1-3

²⁵ Genesis 15:1-2

²⁶ See Genesis 12:3

the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."²⁷

"No, Abram. No, Abram, I am going to give you a large family. Go outside and look at the heavens."

Now to really appreciate this you have to go to Kansas. You can't stay in Pittsburgh. Or you have to go to Montana. Or the mountains in Colorado would also be good. You have to go to big sky country. Pittsburgh is little sky country. If you go to that big sky country and you look up at the heavens you are amazed and you fall back on your heels with the glory and the beauty of the heavens. This is what Abraham saw. And God said to him, "Look at those stars and count them if you can. So shall your descendants be."²⁸

Now, let me just backtrack for a moment because when Abram was first given that promise, "In you and in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed,"²⁹ Abraham heard that promise, but shortly after he heard that promise do you know what he did?

He went down into Egypt and he said to Sarah, "There is a little problem here. We could get into deep trouble here in Egypt and I am afraid of Pharaoh. So why don't you pretend you are my sister? And we will act like we are brother and sister rather than husband and wife." And he goes down into Egypt and lo and behold Pharaoh takes a liking to Sarah.

Now, think about this for a moment. How many of you husbands would do something like that? You would say to your wife, "Ok, we are going to get in a little trouble here. We are on this journey. And, you know, the people in this surrounding area don't cotton to the likes of us too much so let's strike a little bargain. We'll pretend we are brother and sister." And as you do this your wife is put in a compromise situation. How many of you would do something like that? Wouldn't you find that a little reprehensible? This is not how a godly person acts. But, you see, that's who Abraham was.

And then we read in verse six of Genesis 15. "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness."³⁰ You see, Abraham believed in the one who justifies the ungodly. That's what happened.

Now go back to Romans chapter four again if you would, please, and the very first verse of Romans chapter four. This is how Paul starts out the chapter. "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?"³¹ What did Abraham find? Abraham found out on a very personal level that when he believed the promise of God, when he believed in the one who justifies the ungodly, he experienced forgiveness for all of his sins and he received righteousness as a free gift from God. That's what Abraham found out.

²⁷ Genesis 15:4-5

²⁸ See Genesis 15:6

²⁹ See Genesis 12:3

³⁰ Genesis 15:6

³¹ Romans 4:1

And David found out the same thing. Isn't this what David discovered? It wasn't just an intellectual pursuit. It was a personal thing once again. And when David believed in the one who justifies the ungodly, David received the free forgiveness of all of his sins and he received the free gift of the righteousness of God in Christ.

I remember a few years ago when I went into a chaplain's office and that chaplain looked me square in the eye and he said to me, "Lieutenant, have you ever accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?"

And I thought to myself, "I had better not lie to the chaplain," and I said, "No." And that chaplain read to me Scriptures that indicated I was a sinner. He really didn't have to convince me of that. I knew it already. Then he read me other Scriptures like, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved."³² "Repent therefore and return and your sins will be forgiven."³³ And we got down and prayed together and I received the forgiveness of all of my sins and I received the blessing of the righteousness of God in Christ. This is what our text is about.

How about you? How about you? How about some of you children and some of you young people here at this service of worship? You need to trust Jesus Christ the one who justifies the ungodly. He is the one who forgives all your sins and gives you the gift of righteousness. You need to trust him.

With all my heart I urge you. I beg you, come to Christ. Come to Christ because Jesus Christ is the one who justifies the ungodly. When you come to Christ you have forgiveness and the gift of righteousness and this is the burden of our text. Trust Christ, the one who justifies the ungodly.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you, thank you for your grace. Thank you for Jesus Christ. Thank you that in him we have right standing with you that no works of righteousness on our part are added to what Jesus Christ has done and that when we trust Christ, the one who justifies the ungodly, we have forgiveness of all of our sins and we have the gift of the good works, the good deeds, the good life, the righteousness of Christ. Thank you that this is the case.

And we pray together, Father, that you will bring home to our hearts more and more this truth, this truth that in trusting Christ there is the justification of the ungodly.

Bless us to this end we ask in the great and good name of Jesus Christ who is the only Savior. For it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

³² Acts 16:31

³³ See Acts 3:19