

# The Real Meaning of Christmas

Galatians 4:4-5

[Phil Johnson](#)

Every year around Christmas, I start to get questions from people who want some biblical justification for celebrating Jesus' birth with a holiday. I'm sure you have heard all the arguments about Christmas being a pagan holiday that was adapted by the Romans and Christianized, and all the reasons Christians shouldn't celebrate a pagan holiday and whatnot.

It's well-known, I think, that most of the puritans opposed the celebration of Christmas on the grounds that it was a vestige of Roman Catholicism, there was no biblical mandate for such a holiday. It's one of a few issues where I think the Puritans were wrong (even though in most other ways the Puritans are spiritual heroes of mine).

But there seems to be a growing suspicion of the Christmas holiday even today—especially among evangelicals who are fed up with the shallowness and superficiality of worldly worship. If Christmas is just one of the avenues through which superficial worship finds its way into the church, they say, maybe we should steer clear of it.

I got an e-mail a few weeks ago from someone in GraceLife who wanted me to deal with these issues. I can't really want to devote the whole hour to talking about the

history of Christmas, I do want to answer the larger question with two points from Scripture.

First of all, Romans 14:5-6 clearly puts the observance of holidays in the category of indifferent matters. It's not a sin if you celebrate, and it's not a sin if you don't: **"One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord."**

That's the first point: whether you celebrate holidays or not is up to you. The second point is related to that and there's a hint of this at the end of the passage I just read: If you celebrate, do it in a way that honors God. Regard the day as unto the Lord. Or, in the words of 1 Corinthians 10:31: **"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."**

My personal advice: celebrate Christmas, but do it in a way that honors God and keeps Christ at the center of it. You've seen, I suppose, a lot of news and commentary this year about the secular world's campaign to remove Christ from Christmas and turn it into a humanistic holiday. It honestly doesn't bother me if there's no Christmas tree in the public square or no manger scene on the lawn at City Hall. I don't resent it if the unbeliever checking me out at the grocery store says, "Have a nice holiday" instead of "Merry

Christmas." It's our duty as Christians to tell the world about Christ, not vice versa.

And even Christians sometimes need to be reminded of what Christmas is really about. In 2012, the Washington Times asked John MacArthur to write an editorial on the real meaning of Christmas. Here is an excerpt that summarizes what he had to say:

The fact that people think of Christmas trees as religious symbols proves Christians have not made their message clear.

For believers, this surely ought to be a more urgent matter of concern than the so-called "war on Christmas."

Secularists who can't stand the sight of a Christmas tree pose no real threat to the church or its mission. It ought to be troubling to us that in a culture dotted with churches and filled with professing Christians, we haven't managed to break through the confusion and commercialization of the year's biggest holiday and show the world what we're actually celebrating.

Christmas is about the birth of Jesus Christ. It's not just a poignant story about a baby born in a stable because his family was turned away from an inn. According to the New Testament, the baby is God in human flesh, voluntarily stepping down to live among humanity, as a servant, in order to take the burden of others' guilt and pay the price for it by sacrificing his life for them.

I remember when our three boys were small enough that all five of us fit in a Honda, the whole family to Oklahoma to celebrate Christmas with my family. In those days we had an old car without a working cassette player, so for audio entertainment we were at the mercy of radio stations along the way. And once you leave Los Angeles, your choices get pretty thin.

And at one point around Barstow, we tuned in something so bizarre I have never forgotten it. I was tuning the radio, trying to pick up something worth listening to. And I tuned into a Christian radio station. I just caught the tail end of a familiar Bible-teaching program, so I knew this was a Christian radio station. And the program was over, so they broke for a commercial. This commercial sounded like nothing I had ever heard.

A giddy woman's voice was singing butchered Christmas songs. She was singing, "Jingle bells, Batman smells, Robin laid an egg"—and a whole bunch of other totally silly stuff. And she was singing it in a dizzy, dumb, voice.

A more sober man's voice came on and asked, "What are you so happy about?"

She replied in a sing-songy voice, "It's the birthday of my favorite person."

And the guy asked, "Who's that?"

I thought she was going to say the Riddler or something. But she said, "It's *Jesus'* birthday!" and then she launched

into a giddy little talk about how the real meaning of Christmas is how it's the season to be jolly, and it's Jesus who makes real jolliness possible, and we all ought to be jolly, and that kind of thing. I kept waiting for an announcer to break in and say something about the *real* meaning of Christmas, but it never happened. This was the message of that little skit produced by a Christian radio station: Christmas is about feeling jolly, and only Jesus can make you truly jolly.

This time of year we are bombarded with television programs, movies, and songs designed to probe the question, "What is the real meaning of Christmas?" Even the secular TV networks get in on it. And I guess we can expect the secular stuff to be a bit off target. After all, these are the most commercialized minds in America—the same people who bring you "Keeping Up with the Kardashians" and "The Vampire Diaries"—trying to teach you a moral and spiritual lesson about the true meaning of Christmas.

And if you listen to these people, they're all saying something similar. The true meaning of Christmas is joy. Or it's giving. Or it's family, and friends, and love, and cheer, and hope, and peace on earth, and human goodness, and man's humanity to man.

Again, some of those things may be *related* to the message of Christmas, but none of them gets to the real heart of what Christmas means.

The Christmas message is not about *sentiment*. I'm not trying to be a Grinch or anything, but Christmas is not about *feelings*. It is about an objective reality.

When the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream to announce the birth of Christ, the angel said (Matthew 1:21), "**She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.**"

That is the real message of Christmas, and it is built right into the name of Jesus: "**He will save his people from their sins.**" If you want to write it down in a single word, the real meaning of Christmas is about *redemption*.

And this morning I'd like to take a close look at the real meaning of Christmas from Scripture. And we're going to do that from a text in Galatians.

Did you realize the apostle Paul wrote about the real meaning of Christmas? You'll find it in Galatians 4. Turn with me there, and I'll read verse 4 and the first phrase in verse 5: "**when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law**" (Galatians 4:4-5).

That is the apostle Paul's summary of the real meaning of Christmas. This morning we're going to break that passage down into four key phrases and look carefully at what it is saying. First, notice the phrase—

## 1. "WHEN THE FULLNESS OF TIME HAD COME"

You know the Christmas carol "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" by heart. There's a verse in that song that attempts to echo Paul's words here in Galatians 4:4. The words of the carol say, "Late in time behold Him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb." I used to wonder what the songwriter meant. It sounds like we're saying Jesus came a little late or something—and as a child I thought Christmas *always* came too late, so that verse made perfect sense to me. But unfortunately, I think the songwriter actually missed the sense of what Paul means in Galatians 4:4. "**The fullness of time**" doesn't mean that He came "late in time." It means He came right on time, at the perfect time, a time appointed by God.

Let's get the context of this passage in our minds so that it makes more sense. Look back at Galatians 3:24. There Paul writes, "**the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.**" The Greek word translated "guardian" (translated "schoolmaster" in the King James Version) is *paidagogos*. It's the word from which we get our English word "pedagogue, meaning "teacher."" But the idea in the Greek word isn't really that of a schoolmaster. The Greek word refers to a very specific kind of servant. If you break the word down into its constituent parts, it literally means "boy-leader." The *paidagogos* was hired to escort a young child to and from school. That was his one job—to see

to it that his master's children made it safely to and from the place where they could be taught. This servant was a guardian and a trustee over the child. So the word *guardian* in the ESV is a good translation.

Now look at the beginning of Galatians 4. Continuing in the same vein of thought, the apostle Paul writes in verses 1-2, **"the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father."**

In other words, there's a sense in which a child might be heir of his father's entire kingdom, **"the owner of everything"** (as Paul says in verse 1)—yet while he is a child, he has no more authority than a slave. In fact, he might be placed *under* the authority of a slave for his own good, until he reaches an age where the father determines that the child is ready to enjoy the privileges of adulthood.

Now follow carefully what Paul is saying here. The Law is *paidagogos*, the trustee responsible for the child's welfare. The law simply brings us to the place where we can learn what we're supposed to learn. God is the authority figure, the Father, who appoints the time for the child to be released from the trustee's oversight. The children represent all humanity, and the nation of Israel in particular—under the care of the law until the appointed time, the time appointed by the Father.



Then Paul says (v. 4), "**when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son.**"

So the idea is not that Christ came "late in time," as the songwriter says, but that He came right on time, at the time determined beforehand and appointed by the Father. Paul is making a statement about the sovereignty of God. This was the plan and decree of the Father.

Christ's coming to earth in human flesh was not an afterthought. God was not responding to human history. This was His plan from the beginning. He appointed the time. He appointed the means. And now He brings it to pass. So what we see in the events of the Christmas story is the outworking of God's eternal plan.

And God's plan did not stop with the birth of Christ. The *ultimate* purpose for His coming was not fulfilled in his birth, but in His death. Remember, we've already seen that the real meaning of Christmas is redemption. And it was ultimately the **death** of Christ, not His birth, that purchased our redemption.

Even *that* was planned by God and fulfilled in His perfect timing. Did you know that it was God who orchestrated the death of His own son? In Acts 2:23 Peter, preaching at Pentecost, told the people of Jerusalem that Jesus was "delivered up [to be crucified] according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." Acts 4:27 says that God's hand and God's purpose predestined the events of the crucifixion.

Why? because those events were necessary for our redemption.

God is sovereign. He is in control of everything that occurs. He determines the times, He sets the boundaries of human action, and, as Paul says in Ephesians 1:11, God **"works all things according to the counsel of his [own] will."**

So the coming of Christ was in perfect accord with the eternal plan of God. Having fixed the time before the foundation of the earth, He brought it to pass right on time.

John MacArthur writes about this verse, What was "the fulness of the time"? [It was] God's sovereign timing. He ordered world events so everything was ready for Christ's coming . . . . Christ's advent could not have been timed more propitiously.

Politically, the Roman Empire was at its height. Rome had given the world good roads, a fair system of government, and most important, the *pax Romana*, world peace under the rule of Rome. For the first time in history, people could travel with relative ease almost anywhere in the empire—and the apostles could carry the gospel message the uttermost parts of the world.

Culturally, the world was becoming more unified. More people than ever were educated, and . . . even the common people . . . spoke Koine Greek, the dialect that the New Testament was written in.

Spiritually, the world was diverse, but open . . . . Among the Jews, a renewed interest in the Scriptures was leading to revival on the one hand, typified by the ministry of John the Baptist, and a strong pharisaic movement on the other hand. Christ could not have arrived on the scene at a more opportune time. It was the perfect time, sovereignly determined by God—"the fulness of time."

Now look at the next phrase I want to call your attention to:

## 2. "GOD SENT FORTH HIS SON, BORN OF WOMAN"

We won't spend long on this phrase, but I want to point out that it underscores the eternality of Christ; the deity of Christ; and the humility of Christ. Paul expands on this thought in Philippians 2:5-7, where he writes that Christ was in the form of God (eternally). But He considered equality with God not a thing to be held on to, so He "**made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.**" That's the Christmas story again. Eternal God clothes Himself in humanity, and is born into a humble family. It is an inconceivable step of unmeasurable humility. You wouldn't think He could step down any further.

But again, the Christmas story doesn't end in the manger—it goes all the way to the cross. Even in Philippians this is true. The apostle Paul goes on to write, "**being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the**

**point of death, even death on a cross"** (Phil. 2:8). (Again the theme is redemption in the eternal plan of a sovereign God.)

This phrase "**God sent forth his Son, born of woman,**" also reminds us that Christ was virgin-born. The phrase also points back to Genesis 3, one of the Bible's first promises concerning the redeemer who would come—Genesis 3:15, where God curses the serpent and prophesies that his head would one day be crushed by the seed of the woman—not the offspring of a man and woman, but the seed of the woman.

Unlike any other person ever born into the world, He began life without the taint of human sin, without the fallen nature of Adam. He was God in human flesh, sent by the Father to accomplish the work of redemption.

Now look at the next phrase, which is where I want to dwell:

### 3. "**BORN UNDER THE LAW**"

What does this mean that Christ was born "**under the law**"? Someone says, "It means he was Jewish." And that is true, of course, but I don't think that is all the apostle has in mind here.

The phrase "**under the law**" occurs at least 12 times in Paul's epistles, so we know it is crucial in his thinking and in his theology. Most of you will be familiar with Romans 6:14-15, for example, where Paul writes, "**you are not under law but under grace.**" In Galatians 3, just before the verses we

are looking at, He writes, "**before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed**" (Galatians 3:23). That's the context where he compares the law to our guardian, and two verses later, he says, "**now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.**" So he's talking about being under the guardianship of the law—like children with no grown-up privileges.

That concept—and this phrase "**under the law**" has a specific meaning to the apostle Paul, and I want you to see what it is. So let's look once again at the context of Galatians 4.

Remember what occasioned the writing of Paul's epistle to the Galatians. Some false teachers—legalists—the *Judaizers*, were trying to impose the ceremonies and rituals of the Mosaic law on all Christians. They were in essence saying that in order to become a true Christian, a person must also submit to all the Law of Moses. In essence they taught that only Jews could be saved, so if you were a Gentile, in order to become a Christian, they said, you needed to become a proselyte to Judaism.

Circumcision and the dietary laws became the test issues. Even the apostle Peter compromised on this issue for a brief time. It was not because he was confused about the doctrine, but apparently because he was intimidated by the Judaizers, still squeamish about Old Testament standards of ceremonial uncleanness, or whatever. And he cut himself off from the

Gentile Christians in order to eat at a segregated table with the Judaizers. This was a tragic episode in the later ministry of Peter, and it led to a public rebuke from the apostle Paul. Starting in Galatians 2:11, Paul describes how he confronted Peter:

**But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.**

**12 For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.**

**13 And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.**

**14 But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"**

The issue at stake was justification. Look at the next two verses. The ESV punctuates this as if verse 14 is the end of the rebuke he aimed at Peter. But I don't think so. Most of the Galatians were Gentiles. I think Paul is still quoting what he said to Peter. Verse 15:

**We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;  
16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have**

**believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.**

Paul is reminding Peter that the centerpiece of New Testament theology is the doctrine of justification by faith. This is the doctrine that makes Christianity distinct. Every other religion known to man teaches some system of human merit. Christianity alone teaches that the merit necessary for our salvation is supplied by God on our behalf.

Now before anyone accuses me of straying too far from the real meaning of Christmas, let me say that this issue is so much at the heart of the Christmas message of redemption that if you have never understood justification by faith, I'd say you have never really understood what Christmas is all about.

Justification is defined theologically as the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous. When God justifies a sinner, he looks at the person and says, I accept that person as completely righteous. It is a divine "not guilty" verdict—and more. It elevates the sinner from the condemnation he deserves to a position of divine privilege in Christ.

Now this poses a huge theological problem. Proverbs 17:15 says, "**He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD.**" In other words, God Himself strictly forbids us to declare a

guilty person righteous. God Himself says in Exodus 23:7, "**I will not acquit the wicked.**" The King James Version translates it this way: "**I will not justify the wicked.**"

Two obstacles exist with regard to justifying sinners. One is our sin. We accumulate guilt every time we sin, and true justice demands that every sin be punished. To let an evildoer go unpunished is by definition unjust. God is obligated by His own perfect justice to exact a full penalty for every sin. We understand this intuitively. It's unjust to ignore the crimes of an evildoer. That principle is innate even in the human conscience. Our sense of justice is twisted and corrupted by sin, but no one believes it's OK to let evil go unpunished. We all sin—and we sin more often and in worse ways than we want to admit. We deserve punishment, and even our own consciences tell us that.

The second obstacle to our redemption is our own utter lack of merit. Not only do we accumulate guilt (or *demerit*) every time we sin, but we also lack the necessary *merit*. In other words, even if the slate could be completely wiped clean, all we would have would be a blank slate. And in order to be acceptable to God, we are required to have the full merit that comes with perfect obedience His law. Forgiveness for our sin isn't enough, we still need the merit of a perfect righteousness.

Those would seem to be impossible obstacles, wouldn't they? No one who really contemplates the human dilemma



seriously from a biblical perspective can remain arrogant or self-righteous.

On top of all that, Scripture says, "**all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment**" (Isaiah 64:6). And (1 Corinthians 3:19) "**the wisdom of this world is folly with God.**" The very best things we do or think are tainted and defiled with selfish motives, sinful pride, self-love, self-serving agendas, and wicked self-righteousness. Nothing we do is truly righteous, because it all comes from a heart tainted with sin. At our very best, we fall short of loving God with a whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. And since that's the first and most basic of all the commandments, none of us can possibly measure up to God's standard. The Pharisees devoted more energy than anyone to the pursuit of spiritual merit, and Jesus said, "**I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**" (Matthew 5:20).

What is God's standard? Matthew 5:48: "**You . . . must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**"

But there were people in Paul's day who thought if they could just be as good as they could possibly be, they might earn enough merit to please God. And there are still people today—for all I know, there may be some in this very room—who think if they're as good as they can possibly be, God will be merciful, and settle for their righteousness, even though it's like a defiled garment. In short, they are trying to

justify themselves before God through their own works, and in the process, they only insult God and compound their own guilt. They are trying to earn their own righteousness. That is the very definition of "self-righteous."

I just quoted twice from Matthew 5. That's part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and that whole sermon was a full-on attack against self-righteous religion. He singled out the Pharisees, not because they represented some kind of far-fetched paganism. They believed the Bible. They kept the law more fastidiously than anyone else. By human standards they were as "good" as it is possible to be. But Jesus said their goodness is simply not good enough to please God. That ought to tell us something, right?

Jesus was teaching as plainly as possible that God will be pleased with nothing but an absolutely perfect righteousness. He taught that it is not good enough to avoid killing; we must also avoid the sin of hatred. He said if you lust in your heart, it's the same as committing adultery. He set the standard as high as it is possible to set it, and then said if you don't have a righteousness that perfect, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Don't you see how that condemns us all?

The apostle James destroyed any vestige of hope we might have for being justified by law when he wrote, **"whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it"** (James 2:10).

What are we supposed to conclude? That you cannot be justified by the works of the law. It is utterly impossible. The apostle Paul underscores this same truth again and again:

- Acts 13:39: "**Y[ou] could not be justified by the law of Moses.**"
- Romans 3:19-20: "**We know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.**"
- Romans 4:15: "**The law brings wrath.**"
- Galatians 3:10: "**All who rely on works of the law are under a curse.**"
- Galatians 3:11: "**Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law.**"

Paul could not state it any more clearly than that. To make the fatal mistake of thinking you can be justified by being good enough to make yourself acceptable to God is to put yourself under the condemnation of the law.

This was the whole problem in Galatia. People were teaching that it was necessary to obey the law in order to be justified. In Galatians 1:6, 1 Paul calls this "**a different gospel,**" and he pronounces a solemn curse on anyone who would twist the gospel like that.

Now follow this: When Paul spoke of those who were "**under law**," he was speaking of people who thought they could be justified by obedience to the law. Let me show you this. Look at a couple of parallel passages, right here in Galatians. One is Galatians 4:21: "**Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?**" Because if they listened to the law itself, they would hear that it establishes impossible conditions for justification. It actually condemns those who fail to obey it. So for sinners, the law could be a means of condemnation, but never a means of justification. For a sinner to embrace the law as a means of justification is sheer folly. Yet there were those who "**desire[d] to be under the law**" (4:21).

Now look at the parallel verse in Galatians 5:4. And I'm going to read it from the New American Standard Bible, because it gives the sense more clearly. Paul writes: "**You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.**"

Do you see the parallel? Those "**who are seeking to be justified by law**" in Gal. 5:4 are the same as those who "**desire to be under the law**" in 4:21.

Therefore, to be "**under the law**" in Paul's terminology is to be *under the law as a means of justification*. This is very important. When Paul says we are not under the law but under grace in Romans 6, he is not condemning the moral teachings of the law. He is not releasing us from standard of

righteous behavior established by the law. He is not setting up some sort of libertinism where anything goes. In fact, in Romans 7:12, he calls the law "**holy and righteous and good.**"

So when Paul says we are not under law, but under grace, he is not giving the thumbs up to antinomianism. He's not consigning the Ten Commandments to the dustbin of outmoded Old Covenant precepts. He is certainly not saying disobedience to the moral teachings of the law is now OK. When he says we are "**not under law,**" He is teaching that we are justified by grace through faith, not by the works of the law.

So are we clear on this? The phrase "**not under law**" means that we are not trying to justify ourselves by obedience to the law. We are no longer under the condemnation of the law. And we are released from the duty of trying to attain a righteous perfection of our own through our own works.

Now think about this: When the apostle says in Galatians 4:4 that Jesus Christ was born "**under the law,**" this is much more than a statement that Jesus was Jewish. It means that He was under the law in every sense, obligated to fulfill the law perfectly.

Look at our passage again (Galatians 4:4): "**When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law.**" Jesus *was* obligated to obey the law as a means of righteousness.

That takes us to the final phrase I'd like us to consider this morning, the first phrase in verse 5:

#### 4. **"TO REDEEM THOSE WHO WERE UNDER THE LAW"**

Now Paul is clearly making a logical connection between the last phrase in verse 4 and the first phrase in verse 5: Christ was **"born under the law,"** in order **"To redeem those who were under the law."** There is a close connection between his being under the law and our being redeemed from the curse of the law.

Here's why: Christ lived impeccably **"under the law."** We studied this truth a couple of months ago when we talked about the baptism of Jesus, and His determination to **"fulfill all righteousness."** Hebrews 4:15 tells us He **"in every respect [He was] tempted as we are, yet without sin."** He fulfilled the law perfectly, to the letter. First Peter 2:22 says, **"He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth."** Hebrews 7:26 says He is **"holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens."**

This is crucial to our redemption, because 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, **"For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God."**

If Christ was perfectly sinless, then He did not deserve to die. As one born **"under the law,"** He would have been subject to the curse of the law if He had violated even one command,

but of course He did not—He *could* not, because He is God. He fulfilled every aspect of the law to the letter—to the jot and tittle.

Yet He did die. More than that, He suffered the wrath of God on the cross. Why? Scripture tells us it was because the Father imputed the guilt of our sin to Him, and Christ paid the price for it. Consequently, the merit of His perfect obedience can be imputed to our account.

So His death paid the price of our guilt, and His perfect life supplies us with all the merit we need to be acceptable to God. That is how God overcame the two great obstacles to our justification. And as Paul says in Romans 3:26, that is how God can remain "**just and [yet justify sinners through their] faith in Jesus.**" He has personally paid the penalty for their sin, and He has personally obtained a perfect righteousness on their behalf in Christ. So He alone can justify sinners.

You say, *Does the Bible teach that?* Repeatedly.

We could start in Genesis 15:6, where Scripture tells us Abraham "**believed in the LORD; and it was imputed to him for righteousness.**" Anytime any sinner is redeemed in Scripture, it is by an imputed righteousness, not a righteousness that is somehow earned or achieved by the sinner for his own redemption.

Romans 4:6-7 tells us that David also knew the blessedness **"of the one to whom God [imputes] righteousness apart from works."**

This is the whole point Paul is making in Romans 4: Justification has always been by faith, not by works, and through a righteousness that is imputed to the believer. Abraham understood the doctrine of justification that way. David understood it. So, as Paul points out, from the beginning of Scripture to the end we see that the only merit God accepts is a merit that is imputed to our account. He never pronounces us righteous because of our own works of righteousness.

On the contrary, remember that God says all our righteousnesses are imperfect, flawed. To God they aren't good at all, but defiled, like soiled undergarments. In fact that verse uses an expression so loathsome that it would be impolite to describe it in a graphic way in mixed company. But that is how God sees our works—no matter how good they are by human standards. They are unacceptable, filthy, an offense to a righteous God.

That is why our obedience can never be good enough. And that is why those who hang their hope of heaven on their own good works only doom themselves.

Paul says this explicitly. Look at Romans 10. Turn with me there for a moment. Here Paul is explaining why the



majority of the nation of Israel rejected Christ. His heart was broken for Israel. He wrote,

**1 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.**

**2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.**

**3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.**

Rejecting the perfect righteousness of Christ that would have been imputed to them if they had believed, they opted instead for an imperfect righteousness of their own. They mistakenly assumed, like most people today, that the best they could do would be good enough for God. There's two obvious problems with that: 1) our very best can never be good enough for a perfect God; and 2) none of us can honestly say we have ever really done our very best. So by any standard they doomed themselves to failure. Their sin remained uncovered, and they were condemned by the law.

Here's the good news of the gospel: for everyone who believes, Christ's fulfillment of the law counts on our behalf, and His blood counts as payment for our failures. Verse 4 of Romans 10 says: "**For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.**" That little word "end" is translated from the Greek word *telos*. It is a very

strong word, meaning that Christ is the fulfillment of everything the law intended.

In Christ, the ultimate goal of the law—a perfect righteousness—is made available to every believer. His righteousness is imputed to us by faith, and that is why God accepts us in Christ and for Christ's sake. That is the doctrine of justification by faith. That is what makes Christianity different from every religion ever invented by the human mind.

In Romans 4:4-5 Paul says this doctrine of justification by faith makes the difference between heaven and hell. He writes, **"Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."** In other words, if you want to try to earn your own righteousness, you will fail—and you will be paid the wages of your sin. But if you believe in the God who justifies the ungodly, full forgiveness for your sin has already been purchased by Christ, and His perfect righteousness will be imputed to your account.

The apostle Paul himself learned this truth the hard way. He had labored his whole life as a Pharisee trying to establish his own righteousness by the law. (I suspect he came closer to succeeding than any of us would have.) He described his efforts in Philippians 3:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:

5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;

6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ . . .

Why? What was so important to Paul about dumping all his own righteousness on the rubbish heap? Because he knew it was flawed. In fact, he uses a Greek word, *skubalon*, that's much stronger than "**rubbish**." In the King James Version it's translated "**dung**," and that's what it means—manure, excrement, sewage.

And Paul knew that in Christ he would be the recipient of a perfect righteousness. In verse 9 of Philippians 3, he says: "[I want to] be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

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That's the real meaning of Christmas according to the apostle Paul: Christ came to justify sinners who had no way of justifying themselves.

It is not about emotion, but it certainly stirs my deepest emotions. It's not just a message of joy, but I don't know any truth that brings me more joy. And this Christmas, as we ponder the Christmas message, let's allow our thoughts to go beyond the Son of Mary in a manger to the Son of God on the cross, and let our hearts be filled with genuine wonder at the richness of the real message: "**Unto you is born this day . . . a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord**" (Luke 2:11).