

But to Him that Worketh Not...

Christ Justifies the Ungodly

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Bible Text: Romans 4:1-8; Psalm 32:1-2

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I have been thinking over this little text in Romans four at verse six:

Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.¹

And this text always causes me to pause when I read it, because it seems like it doesn't flow right. He starts to talk about God imputing righteousness without works, and the man to whom God does this is blessed. And we think -- our mind naturally goes in this line of thought -- that God gives a man righteousness when the man hasn't worked for it. But that's not really what the text is saying. And if it is saying that, then we are left with this conundrum.

If he is saying that David's psalm supports the proposition that God gives righteousness when a man doesn't work for it—righteousness apart from works it really says—then why does the text that he is quoting speak about God forgiving sin and not counting it against a person?

It seems like that the text that Paul is citing doesn't support the proposition that he seems to be making. Not that the proposition is false, or that the text isn't blessed in what it communicates, but how are the two connected? How is it that a verse describing how God forgives sin, how does that verse support the notion that God gives righteousness to a man without works?

How easy it is for us to fall into the trap of thinking that righteousness is a string of good works, a pile of obedience, if you will!

We just, as fallen men, cannot get away from this view of righteousness, that righteousness is an act of obedience, or a collection of acts of obedience, or a balance in goodness and badness towards obedience.

¹ Romans 4:6-8.

In short, we tend to confuse righteousness with good deeds, and they are not the same. A man can have a pile of good deeds and not be righteous, can't he? And I think that this conception of ours -- which we know technically in our mind, if we think about it, is incorrect -- nevertheless bubbles up subconsciously when we read these texts, and it tricks us and diverts us from a clear understanding of the text. It causes us to misconstrue these texts, to fail to grasp what is really being said by Paul in them.

When reading chapter four we have not to forget what Paul has already established in chapters one, two and three. What has he established with regard to sin and righteousness?

First, that God's wrath is against sin. Romans 1:18 -- "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness."² God is angry with and judges sin. He judges unrighteousness.

Now this means that he judges it in everybody, not just in people who are only sinful, for whom all their acts are one string of sins. The implication is that even for one sin there is wrath, there is judgment because one sin is an act of disobedience and causes a person to be unrighteous.

And he goes further to nail this down. If you read that list of sins in verses 29 through 31, we won't read it, but there is something in there for everybody, isn't there?

As the old character, "one sure if another fails!" You can go through that list and check off all the things that you didn't do, but before you are over with it—if you are honest—you will see that somewhere in there you are caught up in transgression against the law of God and in disobedience against his perfect holiness and righteousness.

And so, therefore, everybody is implicated in this sin and this unrighteousness and, therefore, in the judgment, in the wrath which he has laid down at the beginning of this whole treatise.

In Romans two verses one and three:

Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things.... And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?³

Everyone is implicated in this unrighteousness, in this sin. And part of the implication that we have laid upon ourselves is that we are quick to judge other people, especially when they sin against us, when they violate God's law and it impinges on our person and

² Romans 1:18.

³ Romans 2:1, 3.

rights and entitlements. And so, thereby, we validate that law that we ourselves break in return.

Even the heathen break the law in their hearts. Romans two at 14 and 15:

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.⁴

So even the people who aren't given a written law have a law written in the heart that rises up to condemn them, and that they use as a club to condemn their fellow man.

And so we come to the conclusion that Paul reaches inexorably by this logic: Nobody is righteous. All men are sinners.

Romans three 10 and 19 and 20. Let's read these verses together.

Romans 3 verse 10: "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one."⁵

And at verse 19:

Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God [and] Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin."⁶

And in verse 23: "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."⁷

So this is the predicate upon which we come to Romans chapter four.

Mark very well verse 20 of chapter three. "By the law is the knowledge of sin."⁸ No man can be justified by the keeping of the law because, "By the law is the knowledge of sin."⁹

The law is the description of perfect obedience to God. Even if it is a truncated law, it lays down requirements for a man to be obedient. He must do all of these things in perfection. And whoever keeps the law perfectly is righteous. This is the meaning of

⁴ Romans 2:14-15.

⁵ Romans 3:10.

⁶ Romans 3:19-20.

⁷ Romans 3:23.

⁸ Romans 3:20.

⁹ Ibid.

righteousness. That is, the person is righteous who has perfect obedience to all the requirements laid upon him by a holy and righteous God. And the thrust of Paul's argument is that just one breach destroys the righteousness. Just one breach destroys the righteousness. Righteousness is not a collection of good works, it is a seamless, perfect collection of works in which there is no evil, in which there is no violation of the law.

Therefore, all the ways in which a man *keeps* the law are really irrelevant to determining whether or not he is righteous. No man is righteous on account of his sin, because we have all broken the law. Paul has already concluded that. He has already proven that. He has already demonstrated that. And once sin comes, there can be no righteousness in keeping the law further, because righteousness requires a perfect unbroken obedience.

The bell of one sin, that bell cannot be un-rung, can it? The vase having been broken cannot be put back together. Or, to use a nursery rhyme, Humpty Dumpty cannot be put together again no matter whether all the king's horses and all the king's men work and labor at it. Once the perfect obedience is broken, then the obedience becomes imperfect no matter how long it extends, and so it can never be righteousness again.

So the most saintly person is unrighteous because he has broken the law at some point. Mother Theresa -- unrighteous, subject to wrath, subject to sin in her own works and her own deeds, no matter how well she may be looked up to by the world, because she has not obeyed perfectly the law of God.

Any man, once fallen, even if he begins at some point perfectly to obey and thereafter never breaches the law again, is still unrighteous, even if he is perfect from this point forward all through eternity. He is still unrighteous because he has breached God's perfect standard, God's righteous and holy standard.

What is the standard Paul says? It is the glory of God. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."¹⁰ It is the glory of his majesty and power and perfection and righteousness and holiness. And if we don't live up that standard, it is because we have sinned and fallen short.

What does Jesus say? "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."¹¹ That is the standard of righteousness.

And so men doggedly try to establish their own righteousness by law-keeping, but it is a hopeless quest, because they think that righteousness is a series of obediences and that by piling up a series of obediences, they will be able to submerge their disobedience, to paper over it, to smother it out, to render it negligible. They hope it vanishes amongst the pile of righteousness which they hope to heap up unto themselves.

¹⁰ Romans 3:23.

¹¹ Matthew 5:48.

But, you see, the whole thing is a hopeless quest. You can never undo—even if it were but a single act of disobedience—to restore righteousness broken and lost through disobedience against the Lord.

And then, of course, in chapter three Paul begins to sketch out the solution to this problem. What is the salvation for such people?

He offers a righteousness apart from perfect law keeping. What? If perfect law keeping is righteousness, how can there be a righteousness apart from that? But he offers that.

Verse 21 of chapter three: “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.”¹²

Now he is saying there, that there is a righteousness from God that can be accounted to a person without their keeping the law, and that this notion of righteousness is testified to in the Old Testament in the law and the prophets. They have signified that this righteousness is to come, that it is to become apparent and to be laid by God upon those people whom he would make righteous.

And what is it this righteousness is obtained by? It is obtained through faith in the Lord Jesus. Verse 22: “Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.”¹³

So there is a righteousness from God that can be obtained by faith in Christ apart from the keeping of the law. And so every man is unrighteous because he has not perfectly kept the law. But God offers a righteousness through faith in the Lord Jesus, doesn't he?

And then in verse 24 it says that this righteousness is granted as an act of unmerited favor from God. “Being justified freely by his grace...”¹⁴

So this righteousness is a favor of God. It is a gift of God. It is granted to people who have not kept the law and who have, therefore, obtained unrighteousness -- but that unrighteousness may be set aside, and a righteousness given to them by God through faith in Christ, by the free grace of God to them that believe in the righteousness which God will grant.

And what is the mechanism by which this righteousness is prepared by God and delivered to lost sinners who are unrighteous? He sketches out that mechanism: redemption in Christ.

What does he say in 24b? “...through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: [which] God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.”¹⁵ A ransom paid by Christ for sin. That is what redemption in Christ means.

¹² Romans 3:21.

¹³ Romans 3:22.

¹⁴ Romans 3:24.

We just talked about that last Lord's Day, the meaning of redemption is a ransom paid to set at liberty a person bound by some principle or by some person. So this righteousness of Christ is through the ransom paid for sin, the satisfaction that he offered for sin by his blood shedding upon the cross. And it is applied by faith and it is laid hold of by faith.

And so Paul describes how God takes our unrighteousness and lays it upon Christ and Christ suffers all the punishment for it upon the cross. He expunges our guiltiness in his own blood at Calvary. He pays the awful penalty of divine justice, and thereby God is able in strict justice to pardon our sins for Jesus' sake. Our unrighteousness has been transferred to the sacrifice and so God is able to consider and to declare sinners righteous by the sacrifice of Christ received by the sinner by faith.

And so no man can glory. No man can say, "I am righteous because of my good deeds. I am righteous because I kept the law," because our righteousness is imputed, it is placed upon us when we did not obey the law and we did not obtain righteousness by perfect obedience.

But, you see, the logic of all of this is that no lost man's acts of righteousness can avail to overturn unrighteousness, a futile quest. Righteousness can only be obtained for sinners by the imputation of Christ's righteousness and his satisfaction for our guiltiness when he died on the cross, and we receive that righteousness apart from anything we have done, in spite of anything we have done, but because of God's grace toward us.

So this is the context of Romans four. This is the context. And so when we read Romans four verses one to three we have the righteousness of Abraham obtained through faith.

What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.¹⁶

"It was counted unto him for righteousness."¹⁷

Now we read that and we read it in the context of Romans one to three and we still, often times, fall into the trap of thinking that God dispensed Abraham a measure of righteousness because he believed him. That is not what this text is teaching.

Paul is trying to demonstrate that Abraham was justified, declared righteous by faith, without works and he does so by citing this Old Testament Scripture. "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness."¹⁸

¹⁵ Romans 3:24-25.

¹⁶ Romans 4:1-3.

¹⁷ Romans 4:3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

And often times in our mind when we are reading this, things go wrong at this point. We believe, we think that Abraham believed God and God imputed righteousness to him. Abraham was a good person. He believed God's promise. God approved of that and called him righteous. That is what we think this text means.

But that is not what it means at all, because we have not brought into our minds the true condition of Abraham which is laid out in chapters one to three, which is a true condition of all men -- that Abraham is a lost sinner, that he is unrighteous because of his deeds, and that he is subject to wrath.

It is interesting, isn't it, that almost nowhere in the Scripture that I can think of does it ever say that God pardoned Abraham's sin or that God ignored his sin or forgave his sin. There just aren't any places that I can think where Abraham is described as sinning. Now there are some things that he does that we know are sins, but the text doesn't explicitly say that Abraham sinned, that Abraham broke the law.

But Paul has already proved that *all* men have sinned and broken the law, and no one is righteous. So that has to apply to Abraham. So when we read about Abraham believing God, and God imputing righteousness to him, we have to remember that before that, Abraham was unrighteous, lost, subject to wrath, a sinner, imperfect.

And consider this. If Abraham had been righteous, if he had kept all the law, God couldn't have imputed righteousness to him! He would have already had it of his own proper person. He would have been able to glory in it (as Paul points out he could not). If Abraham had been perfect, if he had been sinless, if he had obeyed all of God's law, if he had been righteous according to his conduct, then he couldn't have had righteousness imputed to him. Neither could Abraham have trusted in the mercy of God and in the promise of God. He would have trusted in his own righteousness, which he was entitled to because he had obeyed God perfectly.

But he didn't obey God. No doubt he had disobeyed God in any of a number of ways that are common to all of mankind.

Only if Abraham were unrighteous could God impute righteousness to him through his faith or on account of his faith.

We read that Abraham wasn't justified by works. When God says a man is not justified by works what that means—in the context of Paul's argument—is that the man is unjust and unrighteous because of his sinful works. Otherwise he would be justified or righteous because of his perfect works. Abraham broke the commandments, was unrighteous because of his sin. Not that he took a short cut to righteousness, not that obeying the law was tedious and impossible and so he decided he would believe in God's promises instead and obtain righteousness, not that Abraham was tooling along ok, but then he believed God and God counted it for more righteousness.

There is no such thing as more righteousness or less righteousness. There is either unrighteousness or there is righteousness.

The promise of God's righteousness by faith isn't made to people who are on their way to righteousness. It is not made to people who are keeping the law. It is not that God says, "You have kept my law perfectly up to this point and I am going to excuse you from keeping it any more, from laboring under that notion, by just having you believe in my imputed righteousness and my mercy. And then you will be righteous based on your faith."

No, that is not it at all. God's promise of righteousness, of salvation is made to lost people. There wasn't any promise of a Redeemer made until Adam and Eve had fallen into sin, until they had lost righteousness, until they had become unrighteous because of the deeds of the law which they had broken.

So it is not that Abraham was righteous and then God declared him more righteous because he believed. It was that Abraham was unrighteous and lost and a sinner, but God declared him righteous because he had faith in the promises of God, ultimately in the promised seed, ultimately in the promised Redeemer which God had promised unto Abraham.

The promise of righteousness apart from works is made to those who don't have the option of works as a means of righteousness because they have already broken God's law, and all hope is lost of righteousness by the deeds of the law.

So when we read this text we need to remember the context of Paul's logic concluding all under sin, all unrighteous. And, remember, it applies to Abraham. Without that righteousness which God imputed to him through faith, he would have been lost and unrighteous for all eternity. Abraham was lost and unrighteous and guilty like us all. But he believed God's promise. He trusted in God's mercy and God declared him righteous. He laid an alien righteousness upon him which his works did not deserve.

That is what it means when it says he is righteous apart from the deeds of the law. His works didn't deserve to be called righteous, that he was unrighteous, but God declared him righteous. He possessed a righteousness *apart* from the works of the law, which means that Abraham was righteous *despite* the deeds he had done which broke God's law. And this righteousness that God imputed to him was Abraham's only chance to escape that wrath that Paul described against all unrighteousness and all ungodliness in Romans one and verse 18.

And so, too, does he impute to us who believe such a righteousness. He says in verse 23: It was not written just for Abraham only that he imputed this righteousness through faith, but to us also if we believe on him that raised up Jesus from the dead, who was delivered for our offenses and raised on account of our justification.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Romans 4:23-25.

How easy it is to read this text and not put two and two together, as it were, regarding the desperate state of Abraham and God's mercy in declaring him righteous.

But then Paul hits closer to home at verse six. If we can read this text and forget that Abraham was a sinner -- and Paul cannot really go to the Scripture to prove a particular sin on the part of Abraham -- then he goes to another person, doesn't he, in the Old Testament, as an example of how the Lord imputes not the sin of his people to those who trust him.

And, you know, at first blush when you look at it in verse six, this verse causes problems -- "Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works."²⁰ It looks like this claim isn't supported by the text that he then quotes, in which he describes David saying that the man is blessed to whom the Lord will not impute sin, who will forgive iniquities, who will cover over sins.²¹ How could it be that this really supports the claim that he makes that a man is blessed because God imputes righteousness without works?

Well, we can see that this verse that Paul cites from David's psalm *does* support the proposition that God imputes righteousness without works when we understand the true import of that phrase, "righteousness without works."²² It doesn't mean righteousness without doing anything. It means righteousness imputed to the unrighteousness because he has failed to obey perfectly the law. It means righteousness imputed despite evil works. It means righteousness imputed without obedience, without perfect obedience to the law.

So really what he is saying is: David rejoices in God declaring a person righteous when he hasn't completely and he hasn't fully obeyed and he is, in fact, unrighteous in his own person. So that is what the psalm then goes on to demonstrate -- it does demonstrate that. It describes how God calls a man righteous who sinned.

Well, how does he do that? He pardons his sin, he forgives his sin. He doesn't mark that sin against him. He doesn't account it against him.

So where the man has not followed the law and has not kept the law and is unrighteous on account of his conduct, God lays that conduct aside, he doesn't impute it. He doesn't count it against the man. And David is saying that such a person is blessed, isn't he?

You see, the verse does demonstrate imputed righteousness to such a man who is guilty and unrighteous because of sin. He cannot restore righteousness to himself because he is guilty, but God can wipe away his guiltiness and pardon his sin and count him perfectly obedient and declare him righteous despite his sins. So the text does back up Paul's claim that God justifies and declares righteous those who are unrighteous, who cannot be righteous by deeds of the law because they have broken the law.

²⁰ Romans 4:6.

²¹ See Romans 4:7-8.

²² Romans 4:6.

And you might ask, “Why bring up David and his text in this discussion?”

You know, as mentioned before, there is nowhere specifically where God calls something that Abraham did a sin; and yet we know that he was a sinner and that he was unrighteous. There is nowhere where it really says explicitly that God had to pardon Abraham’s sin. But we know that that is what he did when he declared him righteous.

We know some of Abraham’s sins, don’t we?

But, you know, the people of Israel would be likely to excuse those things, wouldn’t they? You think about it. So Abraham had multiple wives, didn’t he? Well, Jesus said that wasn’t according to God’s will. “From the beginning it was not so.”²³ But the Jewish people would be likely to excuse that. After all, they would say, there was provision for polygamy in God’s law. So they would tend to excuse that sin of Abraham’s.

And then Abraham went and deceived, you remember, the king of the land where he fled for protection from famine, I believe it was. Deceived him about the identity of his wife and sister, and the king almost fell into sin. And God judged him for it. Do you remember? And the king rebuked Abraham for deceiving him.

But we are all good at excusing that kind of thing, because in Abraham’s case, he didn’t tell the man an actual lie. He just didn’t tell him all of the truth. What he told him was literally the truth, but the literal statement covered up the true nature of his relationship to Sarah.

So I am sure that the Jewish people would be very eager and glad to absolve Abraham of sin in that case as well, but we know that was sin. We know that was wrong what he did.

And so the Jews are not likely to think of Abraham as a sinner. So what does Paul do? He drags up the most notorious person that the Jewish people love to exalt in, and that would be great King David the psalmist.

Now here is a man that is greatly admired by the people of Israel. Probably next to Abraham, David would be the most important person in their history. And yet no one can deny that David was a sinner. No one can deny that he had committed a great sin. It is possible to think that the sin that David committed, which we read about in our Scripture reading this morning, the adultery with Bathsheba and then murdering his friend and his loyal companion in all of his adversities, murdering him to cover up that sin and to steal his wife from him. Well, you can’t really think of a worse sin than that. It is hard to think of a worse sin than that, to kill your own friend, to kill your own loyal defender, to steal his wife.

And I think that is why Paul uses this instance of David, rejoicing that God doesn’t count sin against his people, that God pardons and forgives; but that such a man is blessed.

²³ Matthew 19:8.

This causes us to come up short, and to realize that David was a sinner, and unrighteous and without hope and subject to judgment, on account of that one sin, if for no other reason. And no one could deny it, no one can weasel out of it, no one can justify it.

How can David be righteous? How can he ever hope to be righteous? No matter how many books of the Bible he were to write, no matter how many psalms he were to sing, no matter how many offerings he would deliver, he could never expunge that guilty stain, could he, of murdering his friend to steal his wife.

And it is in that context that David's exaltation upon God's pardon and mercy becomes a showcase of righteousness imputed apart from the works of the law, righteousness imputed to an unrighteous man, whose deeds are not righteous, but whose deeds are a breach of God's law, and indeed place him under wrath and under judgment.

So Paul uses the implication of David's notorious sin and God's pardoning of it as a proof that righteousness comes apart from the obedience to the law -- that God can impute righteousness to those who don't deserve it, who could never by their own good works labor to expunge the guiltiness of the sin that they have committed against God.

And then, finally, verse five: "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."²⁴

Here is a great text, isn't it, because it really puts it clearly, that those people that are trusting in God, and to whom God imputes righteousness, are in fact the ungodly. We are all ungodly. That is why it is righteousness apart from the keeping of the law.

And to him that worketh not -- so long as a man strives to obtain righteousness by the obedience to the law, he is not trusting in the God who justifies the ungodly.

Here is the flaw of the Roman Catholic system -- that they believe that the good works and the rituals of men increase righteousness according to their catechism, increase justification; that they can attain unto righteousness by their own works, be those works sanctified by the grace of God. Nevertheless they are their own works.

You see, they have not ceased from their own works. They have not fallen into that category of those who work not, who have given up the quest of obtaining righteousness by their own works, who have thrown themselves on the mercy of a God who justifies the ungodly, a God who imputes a righteousness that is alien to them in their own righteousness.

And so long as a man continues to strive to please God and obtain righteousness by the works of the law, he cannot be trusting in the God who justifies the ungodly.

We ought to mention, again, the futility of righteousness by keeping the law. You know, the law is a description—as we said before—of perfect obedience to God. But once it is

²⁴ Romans 4:5.

broken... If you see the law and you come to it with a clean slate with no sin, no taint of sin, like Adam came, sure to keep the law in its perfection, one would be righteous by the deeds of the law. But once it is broken in one place, then the law and all of its prescriptions becomes an indictment, doesn't it. It becomes a check-off indictment. It has a title that says, "Check all the reasons you are unrighteous, the laws that you broke."

It only takes one check mark to be ushered into wrath and judgment forever. It just becomes a list of ways a man is unrighteous. And this is why, to try to keep the law after you have already broken it, is not only a futility -- it also condemns you further, because when you do keep the law, if you manage to keep some part of the law for some period of time, all you have done is admit that the law is the standard that you are obligated to keep. All you have done is condemn yourself by keeping the law. All you have done is stamp your validation upon the fact that you have not kept the law perfectly as you ought, and you are not righteous. And the law stands in condemnation of you. You are affirming the justice of the law that you yourself have broken.

But to trust in God who justifies the ungodly is to cease to work, to cease to labor to obtain righteousness of our own by the keeping of the law.

You remember the writer of Hebrews said in Hebrews four, "For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his."²⁵ This is the promise of rest for the sinner -- that once we realize we cannot attain righteousness by the keeping of the law, and once we have looked to God in faith for the sacrifice and for that alien righteousness, then we can rest. We are at peace. Our righteousness doesn't depend on a frantic attempt to expunge our guiltiness by the keeping of new law and of greater law and of bigger law forever and forever.

You remember the writer of Hebrews says that the model of rest is trust and belief in the promise of God, that the Israelites wouldn't enter into the rest because they wouldn't believe the promises.²⁶ So, too, it is with the sinner who doesn't rest from his works of the law and believe in the righteousness which is by faith from God in Christ.

You see, the reason people won't stop working for righteousness is because they don't believe the promise that God has made, that he will justify the ungodly for Jesus' sake, to those who come to him and believe in it. They can't put their trust in that. That is, to them, a thin reed. It might not work. It might collapse. It is too simple. It is hard to believe. They can't believe the promises that God makes, so they will continue to labor to produce their own righteousness.

It is futility.

To those who give that up, who say, "I *will* trust, I *will* believe in the work of Christ of redemption, for redemption, and in the promise of righteousness imputed to me by God. I *will* believe in that, and I *will cease* to labor. I will repudiate, lay aside all efforts of my

²⁵ Hebrews 4:10.

²⁶ See Hebrews 4:2.

own to attain unto a righteousness I have already breached.” Those people are the ones who are blessed, are the ones who are saved, are the ones who are redeemed!

Sinners love to parade their works. They like to think of, they like to recall, they like to catalog all the good things they have done. They want to make sure they get credit for every one of them, too, don't they? And woe betide a man who does a good work and doesn't get credit for it, who is lost, who is depending on his work and his labor to attain unto righteousness. If you get in their way for the credit, they will run you over, won't they, to get to the credit. They love to write letters to the editor about the good things they have done -- like Jesus described the Pharisees blowing trumpets in the street before the procession of their money that they would take to deposit at the temple for some great work, or their great prayers in public, which proved their righteousness and their great work for the Lord.

The old Pharisee who went into the temple to pray -- remember he said he was glad that he wasn't like that old Publican over there. And then he goes to list all of his good works to make sure that God gives him credit for them. It would be a shame to do something in obedience to the law and not get credit for it, wouldn't it?

But the Scriptures tell us that we are to rest. We are to abjure those things, to lay them aside, to count them as nothing.

In Hebrews six the writer says that we need to leave again, we need to lay aside, we need to get over the issue of the foundation of repentance from dead works.²⁷ We have to repudiate all our efforts to obtain righteousness by works.

In Hebrews nine and verse 14 it says, “How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”²⁸

We have to lay aside all hope in our old works of righteousness and cleave only by faith to that work which Christ has done for us, which God will impute to all those who trust in him.

And so the Publican didn't make this distinction. He didn't trot out his good works. All he was aware of was his great sin, wasn't he? He had nothing to commend himself to God. He had only his unrighteous deeds to beg for mercy.

“To him that worketh not...”²⁹ The mark of being a saint, as one who rests in the imputed righteousness of Christ, is that he never holds up his own deeds as a basis of righteousness -- he never does.

²⁷ See Hebrews 6:1.

²⁸ Hebrews 9:14.

²⁹ Romans 4:5.

Do you remember that beautiful text in Matthew 25, where Jesus describes the King in all of his glory sitting upon his throne and he says to the righteous, “Enter into the joy of thy lord.”³⁰ For I was hungry and ye fed me.³¹ And he lists off all these good deeds.

And they say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?”³²

You see, they weren’t like the sinners were. The sinner would have said, “Yeah, yeah. I remember that. I remember that. Sure. Let me tell you some other things I did in case you have forgotten.”

You see, the righteous, they repudiated those works. They didn’t even remember them. They didn’t even take note of them. They weren’t ready to trot them out. It is amazing -- they tried to talk the Lord Jesus out of reciting their good works! That is the mark of faith in Christ’s righteousness. That is the mark of a person who rests from his works and trusts in Christ, the mark of one who, as Paul says, “Worketh not but believeth on him who justifies the ungodly.”³³

But, rather, the saints exalt in the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to them.

In Jeremiah 23 we read those famous words, “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch,”³⁴ speaking of the Lord Jesus.

And a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, **THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.**³⁵

Here is the promise that God’s people would look to God, look to the Lord Jesus, and declare him to be our righteousness, to put all our trust and hope in our prince and our Savior.

Isaiah 61 at verse 10:

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels. For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.³⁶

³⁰ Matthew 25:21, 23.

³¹ See Matthew 25:35.

³² See Matthew 25:37.

³³ See Romans 4:5.

³⁴ Jeremiah 23:5.

³⁵ Jeremiah 23:5-6.

³⁶ Isaiah 61:10-11.

There is the imputation of God's righteousness to the credit of the people who call upon him and trust in him.

And then, what does Paul say about Christ in 1 Corinthians one at verse 30? "Ye who are in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us righteousness."³⁷ Christ has been made our righteousness by God to all who call upon him.

And David says that we are blessed. "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity."³⁸

Have you thought about how blessed you are, that as you go about your life, as you try to please God and fail so many times, as you realize your own imperfections, as you realize the sin that mounts up in your heart and that you try to resist, but it overflows into action -- to realize that we are blessed who trust in Christ because God does not impute to us our iniquities!

Why is that?

He has imputed them to Christ. He has laid them on his sacred head. "The curse by our Lord was borne. For us a victim our Savior bled and endured that death of scorn. He gave himself our poor hearts to win."

That is why we can rejoice that we are blessed, oh we are blessed, because the Lord doesn't count our sin against us!

We read this text last Lord's Day, but we will read it again, Isaiah 44:

Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant: I have formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee.³⁹

"I have paid the price, the ransom in the Lord Jesus' body and blood to set you free from your sin," that is what it says.

Then what does it say? "Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel."⁴⁰

Well did the hymn writer pen those precious words:

Jesus, thy blood and righteousness,

³⁷ See 1 Corinthians 1:30.

³⁸ See Romans 4:8.

³⁹ Isaiah 44:21-22.

⁴⁰ Isaiah 44:23.

My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming world in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

Oh, let the dead now hear thy voice,
Now bid thy ransomed ones rejoice;
Their beauty this, their glorious dress,
Jesus the Lord our righteousness.

Let's give thanks for the Lord's Table, representing the place where the sin that God imputes not against us, he imputed against his own Son. All our sins were laid upon him, the writer of Isaiah says. He was made a sacrifice for our sins. "The LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."⁴¹ At that Calvary which our Lord's Table reminds us of, our sins were laid upon that body which God provided the Lord Jesus, and he suffered in our place, and all the wrath of God was rained down against him.

Let's give thanks, first, for the bread that reminds us of that body broken for us in our place.

I would like to ask Bro. Whitten if he would give thanks for the bread.

[prayer]

The Scriptures tell us that on the night he was betrayed he took the bread and he blessed it and he broke it and he said, "Take and eat. This is my body which is broken for you. This do in remembrance of me."⁴²

Let's give thanks for the cup that reminds us of the blood poured out for us, an atonement for our sin.

Oh God our Father, we thank you that you have not left us to our own devices for our own righteousness, that when we were without hope, when we were unrighteous, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. You commend your love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

We thank you for this blood that is represented in this cup, the blood of the new testament as Christ said, the blood by which our sins are remitted, and the promise of the New Covenant is made possible, that you will remember our sins and iniquities against us no more. The blood that makes that possible, the blood that executes and enlivens that covenant! We thank you that even when no lamb would do, you have prepared for us God's Lamb, the one you promised Abraham that you would provide. You provided him in the Lord Jesus. We thank you that he shed his blood for us that it might wash us white as snow. We are filthy and defiled. We are all unrighteousness. Christ set us at liberty by taking away our guiltiness, and by it you might place upon us the righteousness of Christ

⁴¹ Isaiah 53:6.

⁴² See 1 Corinthians 11:24.

which we have not earned, but which he had prepared for us by his perfect obedience, by the blood that he shed.

*We thank thee for the blood,
The blood of Christ our Lord,
The blood by which our peace is made,
Our victory is won,
Great victory o'er hell and sin and woe!*

This is what we come together this Lord's day to remember and to give you the praise and thanks for it, to glory in. God, forbid we should glory in anything save the cross of Christ our Lord by which he was crucified for our offenses.

But we thank you that you raised him for our justification, because by doing so you have signified that the debt was paid, the sacrifice was acceptable, the sin was utterly discharged, and the substitute set at liberty having no more occasion, no more duty, no more debt to satisfy. The sin debt being satisfied, the grave could not keep him. We thank you that you have raised him up in power and glory. Help us to see him sitting there! Help us to rejoice in it! Help us to realize we are there with him in heavenly places!

Bless us this week, that we might not forget the basis of our redemption. Help us not to fall into the habit of thinking of our own obedience, of our own attempt at good works. Help us not to claim those, help us not to consider them, help us not to glory in them at all, but only to glory in that righteousness which you have given to us on account of Christ's work and obedience. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Scriptures tell us that after they had supped he took the cup and he blessed it and he said, "Drink ye all of it. This cup is the new covenant in my blood for the remission of sins. Do it as often as ye do it in remembrance of me."⁴³

And the Scriptures tell us as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we do preach the Lord's death until he comes.⁴⁴

Let's sing number 124, a favorite communion hymn, *The Holy One Who Knew No Sin, God Made Him Sin For Us*. We will just sing it *a capella*.

Let's stand as we sing this and then we will close out in a word of prayer.

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⁴³ See 1 Corinthians 11:25.

⁴⁴ See 1 Corinthians 11:26.