

Justification Always By Faith

Romans

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Bible Text: Romans 4:1-8

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Gracious Father, we look to you together even as we have sung in prayer to come to us to make your word clear to us by the power of you Holy Spirit, to touch our minds that its truth may be like a glorious light within us and to touch our hearts that we may feel our hearts burning within us as Christ walks with us in the way and as he teaches us about himself. Lord, our needs and circumstances are so very many, our words are inadequate to meet all of these needs but you and Jesus Christ have fed the thousands through a few loaves and fish and you are able to take your word and break it down for us and feed us on it. Therefore, we pray that you would nourish us by its truth and help us to live in its grace and power for Jesus our Savior's sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

We're reading this evening in the letter of Paul to the Romans and we've come to the beginning of Romans 4. This evening we're going to read Romans 4:1-8. The apostle has been emphasizing towards the end of chapter 3 that the righteousness of God is given to us in Jesus Christ and he has posed a series of questions at the end of chapter 3 that, as I said last time, he actually picks up in chapter 4 and having given us the short form answer at the end of chapter 3, he gives us the longer form answer in chapter 4. So, let us hear God's word,

“1 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.' 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, 6 just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: 7 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8 blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.'”

As we've been making our way through this great letter of Paul to the Romans, one of the things that we've noticed as foundational to all of our studies is that Romans is Paul's exposition of what he calls on two separate occasions "my gospel." His great desire is and has been for some time, to go to Rome to preach the gospel in the great capital city of the empire and for a long time, he has longed to do this and apparently longs to do it for more than one reason: first of all, obviously, in order to minister to the many Christian believers in the capital city of Rome. Then, as he seems to hint at very near the end of his letter, because he has a desire not only to see fellow Christians but to spread the gospel further than it has yet reached and his desire, the Lord apparently has laid on his heart this concern to go beyond Italy and to reach almost the extremity of the Roman Empire in the country of Spain. It certainly looks to me, as though he's dropping a rather obvious hint to the Roman Christians that he also longs that when they meet with him, when they welcome him, they'll want to be part of sending him on in his missionary enterprise, that they in a sense, will become for him what the church in Antioch had long been to him, a sending church, in order that the great apostolic mission might reach to the ends of the earth.

In order to do that, obviously, since many of these Christians have heard of him but never met him and since, presumably, they have heard several different things about him, one of the things he feels he needs to do in Romans and we can thank God for it, is to present to the church there his credentials as an apostle of Jesus Christ, his credentials as a missionary of Jesus Christ and to explain to them the gospel that he preaches. As he does this, he from time to time, as it were, comes down with practical application, some of them, it would seem, directly to the situation in the church that he knows about in Rome but often general application about living the Christian life and living for the glory of God. Then, at the same time, showing them how the gospel applies. The Apostle Paul is in the position of needing to defend the gospel he preaches because he has been maligned for that gospel, he has been bad-mouthed at times by fellow believers for that gospel, there have been misunderstandings of that gospel and, indeed, there have been contradictions of that gospel.

Back there in chapter 3:8, he had given us a little illustration of that when he said in response to what I'm saying, "Why not do evil that good may come?" Clearly that's a misunderstanding of what he's been saying but then he adds, "as some people slanderously charge us with saying." In other words, as the Apostle Paul preached his gospel of the glorious grace of God in Jesus Christ, there were people who said, "If you believe the gospel the way Paul teaches it, then the implication is going to be so-and-so. For example, why not do evil that good may come?" And those of you who know Romans will remember how he returns to this at the end of chapter 5 and at the beginning of chapter 6 when he says, "The glory of the gospel is that where sin has abounded, there grace has abounded all the more," and someone will say in response, "If that's the case then, Paul, you are teaching us that we should sin all the more in order that grace may further abound."

So, he's conscious as teachers of the gospel need to be conscious, that the gospel is also open to misunderstanding and misrepresentation. As he does this, he's anxious to clear up

these misunderstandings and to emphasize and make clear the point that has led to most of those misunderstandings and to, in some places, a violent reaction to his teaching because central to his teaching has been this: that men and women may be justified before the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, apart from the law of Moses, that men and women may be justified, indeed, apart from law at all. And this point he had made very clear in chapter 3:21, “But now,” in the gospel, “the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.” And you can understand, actually you can understand in religious Western 21st century churches, how offensive that would be to some people, “That all my efforts come to nothing, that everything that I have believed about the importance of living in a certain way and striving to do certain things? Do you mean to tell me that these things cannot save me? And that somebody who has never done any of these things may be saved?”

If we catch a flavor of that, then it is easy for us to understand how those who listened to Paul's gospel in the synagogues in which he so often preached that gospel, might be enraged by the idea. But their whole religion depended on the privilege of having the law that no other nation had and that, therefore, this gospel that the Apostle Paul was preaching was a novelty and that it was a denial of the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures. And Paul has ended chapter 3 as we saw last week, by raising the question: do we then overthrow the law by this way of faith? And given the answer, “By no means. On the contrary, we uphold the law.”

Now, having said that, having stated it just as simply as that, from one point of view the Apostle Paul could simply have gone on to the beginning of chapter 5:1 and said, “Therefore,” he says, “now as I’ve presented the gospel to you, as I’ve made it clear that the law and the prophets bear witness to this gospel of free grace that we are justified exclusively by the grace of God in Jesus Christ and through faith in him,” he could have gone on to chapter 5:1 and said, “Now let us go on with this because being justified by faith, we have peace with God and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God,” but it’s almost as though he stops.

Romans 4 is in some ways like the play within the play in Hamlet. Here you are watching a play and in the middle of the play, there is another play and you remember the words, “The play is the thing to catch the king.” We might say similarly about Romans 4 that while Paul might have moved on to his glorious words in chapter 5, he pauses here in chapter 4 and chapter 4 is certainly not as emotionally exhilarating as chapter 5, although when you get to chapter 5:12-21, you certainly need to put your thinking caps on. But it's as though he's saying now that he's going to say, “This criticism of my gospel, let me catch those who criticize the gospel.” And he does a very wonderful thing in this wonderful chapter. His response to those who say, “Paul, this gospel is a novelty. This way of righteousness by faith is a denial of everything that we have ever been taught from the Old Testament Scriptures,” he stops and if he had a pulpit like this which I’m sure he never had the privilege of having, he would have leaned over and said, “Really? Does my gospel really repudiate the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures?”

It's interesting actually, the question that he asks in verse 3, "What does the Scripture say?" Those of you who were reared on the King James version of the Bible will have embedded in your minds the expression that older Christians used to use when you were much younger Christians, "What saith the Scripture? What saith the Scripture?" And before I rush headlong into Romans 4, let me just hold up that question before you because it's a most fascinating question: what does the Scripture say? It's fascinating for several reasons. It's fascinating because Paul sees clearly the whole of the Old Testament not as 39 books but as one book, as one message, as one message that has been written. Not only that, it's interesting, although I wouldn't want to be dogmatic about this, but he doesn't say, "What said the Scripture?" he says, "What says the Scripture?" and you catch the sense with him that the Bible is not some kind of dead book about the past but it's a living book and it's a living book to him, of course, because God speaks to him and to us through his word. There's another thing you notice here: Paul is obviously reasoning whatever the Scripture says is authoritative for believers. This is the last word, this is what John Knox used to speak about "rehearsing the language of Scripture." When I read my Bible, I'm going to the mouth of God and listening to what he's got to say.

Now, those are very interesting things but actually the point I most of all want to make from this little question in Romans 4:3 is to underline for us that this is Paul's basic instinct. It is his absolutely basic instinct in life to live according to the Scriptures, to ask himself about all manner of situations and all manner of teaching, what does the Scripture say, to bring to the Scriptures as a touchstone everything he is taught, everything he hears and to submit everything to the holy Scriptures as the mouth of God and the word of God upon which we are to live.

Of course, as soon as he's asked that question, this whole passage breaks open for us in a rather marvelous way because it actually is a glorious illustration of how well the Apostle Paul handled the Scriptures and there are four things I want you to notice. You may say, "You've just told us four things." Well, in that case, there are eight things I want you to notice and this is the final four: first of all, I want you to notice an illustration; second, an exposition; thirdly, a corroboration; and then I have a question. I had to struggle with a rhyme for that last one but I think I got it there. An illustration, an exposition, a corroboration, a very fine thing, and a question.

What is the illustration? Well, there he is, you see, you can imagine him, he's in the synagogue and as he speaks about the gospel and they're protesting that this gospel is new and it contradicts the Scriptures and he says, "Wait a minute. Let me give you an illustration." Now, we all like illustrations. "Abraham," he says, "that's my illustration. Not exactly chosen from random but that's my illustration." Now, why would he use Abraham as an illustration? Because Abraham was the father of the nation; because Abraham was the father of the faithful. Remember, in the controversies that Jesus had with the Jews in John 8, they cried out to him, "But we have Abraham as our father." That was the thing that distinguished them, they thought, from all other people, that they had Abraham as their father. And Paul, as it were, by a little stroke of clear insight into the Scriptures says, "Then let's talk about Abraham. If Abraham is the great illustration, if Abraham is our father, if Abraham is the rock from which we've been quarried and the pit

from which we've been digged, then let us look to Abraham. What does the Scriptures say about Abraham?" And he pulls out Genesis 15:6 and he holds it up and he says, "The Scripture tells us that Abram believed God and that was counted to him as righteousness." He's saying, "Don't you understand your own father?" Actually, Jesus said exactly the same thing. He said, "If Abraham really was your father, you would have been trusting in me because Abraham understood the way of salvation. Abraham saw my day and rejoiced." Abraham understood that his only standing before God was not on the grounds of anything he had accomplished but exclusively on the grounds of his faith in Jesus Christ.

That's his illustration, now look at his exposition because what follows is really a very simple exposition of that principle. Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Now he's saying secondly, "Let me expound that for you. Don't you understand that? Haven't you grasped that? Hasn't it gripped you that Abraham was justified by faith? It's clear," he says, "it's simple. All you need to do is to take that text and think clearly, man, and you'll see that the gospel was already preached to Abraham." "Now," he says in verse 4, "to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due." Now, I know on Saturday morning you parents are going to be pushing all of your children into your camper vans and you're going to drive them to the Lucas' house to start getting them to collect all of these cones that he has apparently in their zillions around his house. And as he said, "If your little boy picks up a hundred cones then he's entitled to go to Matt Lucas and say, 'Here's my hundred cones. Now give me my dollar.'"

"When you work for something, you don't receive the pay as a gift, you receive the pay as your due," says Paul. "Can't you see that? Don't you understand your Bible," he's saying. "Can't you see that? That if you accomplish something then you get paid for it. But what does the Scriptures say about Abraham? Abraham didn't accomplish anything," he says. "But," look at the words he uses, "to the one who doesn't work. There is nothing in Genesis 15 about Abraham working, working, working, working his way into the pleasure of God in order that he might be righteous before God. No, to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly," and incidentally, that seems to be Paul saying, "And you need to remember that's what Abraham was and that that's what you are by nature. That's what we all are by nature." "The one who believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."

Actually, Abraham was deeply ungodly and he came from a deeply ungodly place. I think that may well be the reason why as he lived his life he from time to time, engaged in actions that were profoundly ungodly. On more than one occasion, he almost lost his wife in the most appalling circumstances because of those characteristic marks in which he'd probably been reared and in a society that had flowed out of the horrors of the Tower of Babel and the ungodliness of those days in Genesis 11 before God began to begin again with this ungodly man. And when Abraham was given the promise that through him the nations of the earth would be blessed and in his seed that Paul understood eventually was the seed of the Lord Jesus Christ, in his seed the nations would be blessed. And you remember that day when God said, "Abraham, you don't have a son but look up into the

night sky and your offspring will outnumber the stars in the sky.” And he was an old man and he believed God. He believed God's promise. He trusted in God, that God would keep his promise which eventually was his promise to send the Savior Jesus Christ. And God pronounced Abraham righteous in his sight.

Now, if you know Paul's letter to the Galatians, you might be tempted to say to Paul just at this point, “Paul,” I wonder if you've ever done this. I guess most of us have. If you've ever preached, you've done this or taught, you've done this. You had an absolutely spellbinding argument to use. Somebody was trying to tell me a joke the other day and it wasn't a long joke and it wasn't a difficult joke but right in the middle of the joke, they completely messed up and gave me the punchline in the middle. “How could I do that?” he said. Don't you want to say to Paul, “Paul, you've forgotten the argument you used in Galatians 3 that settles it. The law wasn't given until 430 years after Abraham. There was no way under the sun Abraham could have been justified by his obedience to the law. Why don't you use that argument?” I guess every minister has met some stranger at the door who's shaken his hand and then said, “Oh, if you'd only said this, that would've been a great sermon.” By which they mean it wasn't a very good sermon but if I'd preached it, it would have been a great sermon.

Why doesn't he do that? Has he got on a little from the days when he was writing Galatians? Not in full control of his arguments? You could hardly say that reading through Romans, could you? No, no. I think part of the reason is because he's got something else up his sleeve and it really is wonderful what he's got up his sleeve. So, we've begun with his illustration, we've seen his exposition and now he brings in his corroboration. He brings in another illustration that proves his point and if his first illustration was an absolute zing-banger of an illustration, his corroboration is absolutely fantastic. We've got Abraham in place and he was justified by faith, that's what the Scriptures say. Then he says, “Now how about King David?” Well, maybe he could've slipped in Moses but you don't get much better than that, do you? Abraham the father of the faithful, David the one who reigns supreme, the sweet Psalmist, the singer of Israel, the one whom every Jewish boy would learn by heart the great model of childhood and yes, of course, the great, in some ways the greatest illustration of salvation in all the Old Testament Scriptures, an adulterer and a murderer.

What about David? What did he do? What did he contribute? What law did he keep in order to be justified and acceptable before God? He reminds of these marvelous words of the 32nd Psalm, “Blessed are those,” says David, “whose lawless deeds are forgiven, whose sins are covered, whose sins are not counted.” Now, David did live in the era of the law. David did live in the era when God's people knew the Ten Commandments. David did live in the era when God's people had the ceremonial law but David understood that he was justified by God's grace and accepted as righteous in his sight only because of that pardon for sin which he received, not by works, not by trying to balance the bad things in his life by the good things in his life, not by trying harder so that, as it were, he could maybe pull himself up eventually by his bootstraps and be acceptable to the heavenly Father. No, David knew the blessing of acceptance and righteousness before God because his lawless deeds were forgiven, his sins were covered

and his sin was not counted. Or as Paul puts it positively, “David's experience, Abraham's experience was that both of them were counted righteous apart from works.”

Do you notice how often he uses that language here of counting in these verses? In verse 3, “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. To the one who works, his wages are counted not as gift but as his due. To the one who doesn't work, his faith is counted as righteousness.” David speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness. It's a counting. It's an accounting. It's a reckoning. It's a counting something to be true of somebody and the Apostle Paul is saying, “The only grounds on which great King David, adulterer and murderer and thief as he was, could possibly have stood before a holy and a righteous God was because this God counts the ungodly as justified.”

This, of course, is the very heartbeat of the gospel, isn't it? We sing sometimes with Count von Zinzendorf,

“Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress.

Bold shall I stand in Thy great day;
For who ought to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.”

Or more frequently with Wesley, “No condemnation now I dread.” Why? Because I'm “clothed in righteousness divine.” That's why I can be bold to approach the eternal throne. And that's what Paul is saying. He's not saying that Abraham and David saw it as clearly as he sees it now in the light of the coming, the doing and the dying and the rising of the Lord Jesus Christ but he says, “Don't you see, Abraham, David, the only way to be acceptable before God, to be counted righteous in his sight is not by the fulfillment of the law, not by the works of our hands, not by our obedience or our best efforts, but exclusively by God's grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

That leads me to the fourth thing: the question. Actually, I probably should have told you there are three questions but I'll answer them very quickly. Question 1 is about what Paul says. Do you notice how he says here, the end of verse 5, “the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” Now, this troubles some people because it might seem to give the impression that since we can't keep the law, God lowers the standard and says, “I know you can't keep the law but if you'll believe in me, then I'll accept that. I know it's not quite the same, it's not quite as satisfactory but if you believe, then I'll accept that as a substitute for your keeping of the law.” Now, I want to say to you that cannot be what Paul means for several reasons but one reason is this: that he's already made clear to us in chapter 3 that it's not the power of my faith that saves me but Jesus Christ who saves me through faith. He uses a similar expression, interestingly, in Galatians 3:22 when he speaks about faith coming and he's actually speaking there about Jesus coming. So, his language here is really shorthand for

this: it's not that faith is a kind of second-rate law that God says, "Well, alright, I'll lower the standard and make that acceptable." At the end of the day, actually, it's not faith that saves anybody, it's Christ who saves through faith.

So Paul has been holding out to us the fact that God has sent his Son into the world to be our Savior and when we understand who he is and are drawn to him by the Holy Spirit, then faith is born in our hearts and faith, the empty hand of faith, takes hold of Jesus Christ and says, "I can't bring anything in my hands. Only you can save me." That's what faith is. Faith is saying there is nothing I can do, only you can save me.]

The second part of the question is this and it's a more important part of the question: how can God do this? How can God possibly do this? How can a perfectly righteous God righteously justify the ungodly? This is the God who says in the Old Testament, "If a judge justifies somebody who is guilty, then that judge is an offense to me." So, how can God justly justify the ungodly? Of course, the answer is here in Paul's letter to the Romans. He says, "Because God doesn't count the sins of believers against them." It doesn't mean that God doesn't count sin. God would be unrighteous, unjust, not to count sin. The splendor of the gospel lies in this so you could say this again and again and again and again until you're home in glory: the splendor of the gospel is as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5, the God who counts sin does not count my sin against me but has counted my sin against his beloved Son. "He has made him to be sin for us," as Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "in order that in him we might be made the righteousness of God."

That was the Old Testament teaching. You remember Isaiah 53, "The Lord has made to meet upon him the iniquities of us all. He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement to bring us peace was laid upon him. With his stripes we are made whole and healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, everyone turned to his own way and the Lord has laid upon him the iniquities of us all." When we see that, when we see that the spotless Lamb of God has borne God's counting of my sin against him then I am able to sing,

"Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow."

The third part of the question is this: why is it that this teaching of Paul's does not lead to moral license? That was what people were saying. Actually, that's the very same thing that was said by the Roman Catholic church in the 16th century about the teaching of the Protestant Reformers. "You let people know about this free grace of God in Jesus Christ in which you can be saved apart from works and people will live anyway they want." What's Paul's answer to that? Actually, his answer is in the rest of the chapter to which we'll come and it can be put very simply like this: the salvation that brings us justification comes exclusively through faith and the person who says since I am justified I can live as I please hasn't the foggiest idea what true faith is. Because he's going on to say and we'll come to this, he comes back to Abraham again and he says about Abraham, "The thing

about this faith by which Abraham was justified is this: that Abraham grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God.”

That's always the case with real faith, isn't it? Real faith always says, “To God be the glory. Great things he has done.” Real faith always says to Jesus, “Lord Jesus, thank you for bearing my sins. You have paid it all and I owe everything to you and I want to yield everything to you because you are such a great and glorious Savior.” All this is ours in Christ. Everything you need is in Christ. Absolutely everything you need to bring you from this world to the world to come. Everything you need to enable you. The thought is staggering: to stand before an infinitely holy God thinking about all the things you have done in your life, all your failures, all your sins, all the ways in which you've wasted the life God has given to you and you'll be able to stand before him clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ as righteous before him as Jesus Christ is righteous because standing clothed in his righteousness.

Doesn't that thought terrify you? Standing before the Judge of all the universe when the books are opened? But then, when you know that Jesus looks upon you and has said to you, “My child, you've come to trust in me. Wear my robe. Wear my robe.” And there you go boldly into his presence and he says, “I recognize that robe. Where did you get that robe?” And you say to him, “Jesus gave me this robe. He said, 'Wear this robe.' He said, 'If you'll wear this robe you can go into his presence.’” The heavenly Father says, “Ah, I knew I recognized that robe. It's my Son's robe. You are welcome indeed to stay forevermore.”

What a gospel. What a Savior. What a privilege. And what a joy to end this day in the Lord's presence singing the praises of the God of Abraham.