

God Justifies the Ungodly: Romans 4:1-8

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This is a significant time for our church, as we're studying through this great letter of Romans. We find ourselves right now in a section of this letter which is expounding the truth of justification by faith alone. I hope that we will savor these weeks of studying this great biblical theme. I hope that we will all come to have a deeper grasp of the Gospel as we probe into Paul's teaching on justification and imputation. These are not abstract theological concepts. This is Good News of Jesus Christ our Savior. And I, for one, want to know my Savior better. I want to know what He has done on my behalf. I want to know how it is that I, a sinner, can be forgiven and stand in the presence of our holy God.

As it happens, next Sunday is Reformation Sunday when we remember the great revival that happened in the 1500s. And I certainly didn't plan for us to be at this particular place in Romans at this particular time, but it's working out wonderfully. We're here at the beginning of Romans 4 learning about justification by faith alone, which was the critical doctrine in the Protestant Reformation. This morning, as study Romans 4:1-8, I'll say some things about Martin Luther, who was one of the key figures of the Reformation. And then what I'd like to do next Sunday is spend most of the sermon sharing about Luther's life, sharing his testimony, sharing how this doctrine of salvation by faith alone totally revolutionized his life, and how God used Luther to have such an impact on so many others, even to our day.

So this morning I'll begin with a few things about Luther by way of introduction, but the sermon will be mainly exposition of these verses. Next Sunday will be mainly illustration of how these truths affected Luther's life in such a profound way.

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Roman Catholic Church in Wittenberg, Germany. At that point he did not realize that his actions would result in what we today call the Protestant Reformation. His desire was not to leave the Roman Catholic Church, but to reform it. Eventually he was excommunicated from the church, though, because he would not recant the convictions he had arrived at based on his study of God's Word.

Luther had been an extremely zealous and dedicated monk. Yet he had no peace. He was constantly plagued by the knowledge that he was not good enough. Try as he did, he could not live up to God's standard of righteousness. He was a sinner, as we all are. But he didn't know what the solution was, other than try harder and harder to be holy.

Everything changed for Luther as he studied the book of Romans. Romans 1:17 was the pivotal verse as he came to understand it correctly in its context. In all of his training up to that point, he had been taught to understand Romans 1:17 in terms of God's judgment. Where it says, "For in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed," Luther was taught to understand that as the wrath of God and the judgment of God. He said he hated the righteousness of God because it simply meant that God would punish the unrighteous sinner.

He said, "I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, 'As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue [the 10 commandments], without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteous wrath!'"

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is supposed to be Good News, was exactly the opposite for Luther. It was bad news. It just meant, "If you don't live up to God's standard, you'll be punished." That's the pressure and discouragement that Luther lived with day after day. I would venture to say that many people live with that same kind of pressure today, although I doubt there are very many who have such a sensitive awareness of their own sin as Luther did.

Maybe you feel this weight. Maybe you came here this morning with the sense of that burden upon you. You know that you fall short of God's standard. You know that you have not lived in such a way that would make God happy with you. You know that you deserve punishment from Him. If you do feel that way, then you are ready to hear the Gospel. Paul wrote all of Romans 1:18 – 3:20 to try to get people to the place where they admit to be sinners. So if you admit that you're a sinner, then you're ready to hear this great news about justification.

As Luther studied Romans 1, and as he wrestled to understand Paul's meaning, he finally came to understand verse 17 in light of its context and saw that the righteousness of God is the

righteousness that God grants to us by faith. The verse says, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” And the verse right before it says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes . . .” This is not talking about God’s judgment and wrath. It’s talking about a gift that God gives to those who have faith in Him. And the gift is God’s righteousness, the righteousness achieved by Christ’s perfect life, and it is imputed to us, it is credited to our account, it is counted as ours by faith. This is what we’ll see more fully in Romans 4 and also in Romans 5.

So even though we are wretched sinners, as Luther understood so well, by faith we can receive the amazing gift of righteousness. Luther said, “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word ‘righteousness of God.’ Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.”

This morning, if you have not yet walked through this gate to paradise, I hope you will. I pray that the Holy Spirit will open your heart to receive this unspeakably great gift.

Abraham’s Faith

In Romans 4, Paul teaches about this gift by referring back to Abraham. Remember the previous paragraph, at the end of Romans 3. Paul was making the point that the Gospel eliminates all human boasting. God has done the work to save us. He gives us a gift. It’s by faith and not by works. Therefore we don’t have anything to boast in, except the cross of Jesus Christ.

Boasting is excluded because we are saved by faith and not by works. And the other point Paul made in that paragraph, another reason boasting is excluded, is because salvation is for Jews and Gentiles. This is not something limited to the Jews. So it’s not something they can boast in. God will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

So now, in chapter 4, Paul turns our attention back to this Old Testament figure whose life and testimony give a vivid illustration of these points. Abraham, who is the father of many nations, was justified by faith, and that happened before he was circumcised. This is what Romans 4 is about. Paul basically gives an exposition of Genesis 15:6. It’s as though he’s preaching a sermon, and Genesis 15:6 is his text. He quotes from it in verse 3,

and again in verse 22, and he alludes to it throughout the chapter, along with other verses from Genesis.

Genesis 15:1-6

In verse 1 God comes to Abram in a vision. And He says, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” In the previous chapter of Genesis Abram defeated the armies of the 4 kings and was able to rescue his nephew Lot. And God reminds Abram here that, “I am your shield.” God is the one who gave Abram victory. At the end of chapter 14, Abram refused to accept any of the goods that the king of Sodom offered. He didn’t want the king of Sodom to have the opportunity to say, “I have made Abram rich,” so Abram accepted nothing from him. And now as God appears to Abram in chapter 15 He says to Abram, “your reward shall be very great.” Abram’s reward would not come from the king of Sodom. It would come from God. And it would be very great, according to the promises made in chapter 12. It was at the beginning of Genesis 12 that God called Abram saying, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

But Abram had his doubts. He wondered how the promises of chapter 12 could come true. Sarai was childless, and it didn’t appear that she would be able to have any children. Abram must have thought, “God promised that I will become a great nation, becoming a great nation involves having an heir, I don’t have any children who could be an heir, so Eliezer of Damascus will have to be my heir. But surely that didn’t sit well in Abram’s mind. That would seem so anticlimactic. Abram longed to have an heir who would be his own flesh and blood. But that didn’t seem possible. In verses 2-3 Abram voices these concerns to the Lord. “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” Abram recognizes here that God is in control of all these things. He says to God, “YOU have given me no offspring.” So he recognizes that God is the one who opens and closes the womb. But he can’t quite reconcile God’s promise with the circumstances that God has brought about so far.

At this point God speaks again, and he clarifies the promise. “This man shall not be your heir [that is Eliezer will not be your heir]; your very own son shall be your heir.” Literally, one

who will come from your own loins, or from your own body. He will be your own flesh and blood. Unfortunately, later in chapter 16, Abram agreed to sleep with Hagar in order to produce an heir. That was an act of unbelief. And then God clarifies the promise even further, when He says very clearly in chapter 17, “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac” (v. 19).

We’re so reluctant to trust God’s promises. We tend to shrink the promise down to something that we can accomplish. But this is one of the things that makes Abraham’s story so encouraging for us, because the Bible doesn’t whitewash his life. Yes, he followed God in radical obedience in many ways. He left his homeland to follow where God was going to lead him, even though he didn’t yet know where that was going to be. Later, after God fulfilled the promise of a son, Abraham was willing to obey God even to the point of sacrificing that son, Isaac. Abraham believed so firmly in God’s promises that he was confident God would bring Isaac back from the dead. But the angel of the Lord stopped Abraham right before he was going to sacrifice Isaac, and the angel said, “Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Genesis 22:12).

So we see these evidences of profound faith in Abraham’s life, but we also see him stumble. We read of the incident with Hagar, and we read of the two occasions when he lied about his wife, saying that she was his sister, because he was scared what might happen to him (Genesis 12 and 20). Those were acts of unbelief. He was failing to trust in God’s promises in those instances. He believed God, but he faltered. He stumbled at times. If we don’t whitewash Abraham’s life, if we look at his blemishes as well as his blessings, I think we can say, “There’s a guy who’s a lot like me.” I think we can see very clearly in the story of Abraham’s life an example of God justifying the ungodly.

Continuing in Genesis 15, God makes this promise and then He does an amazing thing to illustrate the promise. He wants to impress this promise upon Abram’s mind in a very vivid way. So in verse 5 He takes Abram outside and says, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” God is saying that Abram’s offspring will number as many as the stars in the sky. And, of course, the point is: It’s a number that is so great it cannot be counted. You can’t count the stars in the sky. Just like you can’t count the dust of the earth, which was the analogy God used

in Genesis 13. God reassures Abram, Yes, I'm going to keep my promise, and it will be greater than you can even imagine.

Then a miracle happens in Abram's heart. He believes the promise, even though the promise is humanly impossible. It's unbelievable, in a sense. But Abram believes. Genesis 15:6 is such an important statement in the history of salvation. Here in the very first book of the Bible, it says that the patriarch Abram "believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." It was not on the basis of Abram's works that God counted him righteous. It was by faith that Abram was counted righteous in God's sight.

Do you see how wonderful this is? The doctrine of justification by faith alone is not just a New Testament teaching. It's not something Paul made up. This is the way God saves. He chooses to save sinners even though there's no way sinners can be good enough for God. But when we trust in God, when we trust in God's promises, when we trust in His promised Messiah, we are counted righteous. Just like Abram, although we have a much clearer picture of what God has promised and how He has fulfilled those promises.

And that brings us back, now, to Romans 4, where the inspired apostle sheds further light on this.

Notice the flow of thought in these first 8 verses. Verse 1 introduces the subject of Abraham's life as it pertains to these things Paul has just been writing about at the end of Romans 3. Verse 2, then, raises the hypothetical idea of Abraham being justified by works. And I think the point of that is to highlight the connection between works and boasting. Hypothetically speaking, if there was some possibility of gaining a right standing with God based on your works, then you would have something to boast about. And then he quickly adds this phrase, "but not before God."

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said of this phrase, "It seems to me that the Apostle was so moved at this point, and so stirred in his spirit by the very suggestion [of this hypothetical idea of justification by works], that he almost forgot words, and just says, 'but not before God.' He seems to say: I have already shown you abundantly that no flesh can glory in His presence; all have sinned and have come short of the glory of God. No man can glory in the presence of God; the thing is unthinkable."¹

¹ Romans, chap 3:20 – 4:25, page 162.

Boasting is the thematic connection with the previous paragraph. The Gospel excludes boasting. And now Paul is going to give Abraham as an illustration of an Old Testament hero who was justified, not by his heroic deeds, but by faith alone. So he sets that up by first describing the kind of perception many of his Jewish contemporaries had. The Jews of Paul's day viewed Abraham in an entirely positive light. If they were listening to Paul say, "if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about," the Jews would probably be nodding their heads in agreement. Then Paul quickly and emphatically adds, "but not before God!" That's unthinkable. And then he must prove this from the Jewish Scriptures. So he goes back to Genesis to show that Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith. And that's the quotation in verse 3 from Genesis 15:6, which we've already looked at.

Debt vs. Grace (vv. 4-5)

Now let's look at the contrast between a paycheck and a present. Or, to use Paul's words, the difference between paying a debt and extending grace. It's helpful to see the connections between verses 2 and 4, and the connections between verses 3 and 5.

In verse 2 Paul gives the hypothetical scenario of Abraham being justified by works, which he then quickly denies and quotes Genesis 15:6. But in verse 4 he comes back to this concept of "the one who works." What he's essentially saying is, the one who works gets a paycheck, not a present. "His wages are not counted as a gift [grace], but as his due [debt]." When you work for an employer, the employer is then in debt to you. The employer owes you something in return. The employer must give you what is due you for the work you've done.

I had various jobs during my high school and college and grad school years. I remember in my younger teenage years working on some farms bailing hay and cutting tobacco. I worked in a restaurant washing dishes and bussing tables, I worked in a grocery store, I worked in a warehouse that sold building supplies. I worked as a meter reader, and as a security guard. And for each of those jobs, I would get a paycheck. I was appreciative for the paycheck. I imagine at times I expressed my appreciation to my employers, thanking them for letting me work there. But I'm sure I never wrote a thank you note to any of my employers for the paychecks that I received from them. Because the bottom line was, they were compensating me for work I had done. They were in debt to me for the hours I had put in, and they needed to give me my due. That's the system of works.

When Stacy and I got married we received many gifts at our wedding. And we did write thank you notes. Why? Because those people didn't have to give us gifts. They weren't obligated to give us gifts. We had done nothing to deserve those nice things. They were gifts. And we were grateful for their kindness, and we wanted to express our gratefulness.

And that's what verses 3 and 5 emphasize. Verse 3 quotes Genesis 15:6, and then verse 5 fleshes that out a bit more. This is the opposite of the system of works and putting someone in your debt and boasting in what you've earned. Paul draws the stark contrast between debt and grace. In the work world, you work for an employer, putting the employer in your debt, earning a wage from them, and you can take some credit for that wage you have earned. In the realm of salvation, however, that scenario is purely hypothetical. It is a notion that many have in their heads, but it's impossible.

In the realm of salvation, when we're speaking of justification before God, our only hope is grace. And whereas debt goes with works and boasting, grace goes with faith and being counted righteous. Grace is a gift. It's not something you work for, and therefore it's not something you can take credit for. You don't earn it, and therefore you can't boast in it. All you can do is receive it with much thanksgiving. That's faith.

Isn't it amazing how strongly Paul puts this in verse 5! "To the one who does not work . . ." Does he really mean to say that? Didn't I spend a whole sermon last Sunday trying to explain how works are a necessary part of the Christian life? We're saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone—saving faith is always accompanied by works / good deeds. How can Paul describe the justified person as the one who does not work? Well, the context here is justification, and the point is that there is no working in terms of one's justification. The whole discussion here has to do with how a person enters into a right relationship with God. He's not yet talking about the life of faith that flows from this. He's not talking about sanctification here, but justification. And so the stark contrast is between works and faith. So "not working" is equivalent to "believing."

We must come to God, not as an employee seeking a paycheck from an employer. Rather, we come to God as a condemned criminal seeking acquittal. We come to Him in the most desperate condition imaginable, asking Him to be gracious, asking Him to no longer hold our sins against us, and instead to reckon us righteous.

Imputation – The Great Exchange

Imputation is the word that we use to refer to this doctrine. To impute is to credit something to a person which is not theirs. In the presidential debates, if one candidate were to say to the other, “Don’t impute those views to me,” he would mean, “Don’t say that I hold to that view, when in fact that’s not the case.” Imputation is attributing, reckoning, crediting, counting something as yours even if it is not yours, whether that be a particular viewpoint, or certain motives, or a financial burden. For instance, in Paul’s letter to Philemon he says, “If [Onesimus] has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.” That’s the concept. Paul didn’t owe anything to Philemon. Onesimus owed something to Philemon. But Paul is saying, count his debt as mine; I will pay it.

In justification, there are two important exchanges that happen—two things which are imputed, two things which are credited. I’ll point this out to you this morning, and we’ll continue to study this important matter of imputation in the weeks to come, because it continues to show up throughout chapter 4 and also in chapter 5.

The Greek word that Paul uses is *logizomai*, and it’s translated in the ESV as “counted.” Other translations use “credited,” or “reckoned.” But the important thing to see is that Paul uses the same word throughout these verses. It shows up 5 times just from verse 3 to verse 8. Verse 3, “Abraham believed God, and it was *counted* to him as righteousness.” Verse 4, “to the one who works, his wages are not *counted* as a gift . . .” Verse 5, “to the one . . . who believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is *counted* as righteousness.” Verse 6, “God *counts* righteousness apart from works.” Verse 8, “blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not *count* his sin.” Some translations change the English wording a bit in the different verses, but you need to know that Paul uses the same exact word in all of those statements.

Do you see the two aspects of imputation that he speaks of? There is one thing that is credited, and another thing which is *not* credited. Let’s start with what is not credited. This is in verses 7-8 where Paul quotes from David’s words in Psalm 32. “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” This is the forgiveness of sins. When a person has faith in Christ, God no longer counts that person’s sins against him. What Paul was willing to do for Onesimus, that’s what Christ does

for us. Christ says, “Whatever spiritual debt these people have, whatever punishment they deserve, credit that to me; I will pay it.”

When you trust in Christ, all your debt is completely erased. The debt of your sin is no longer held against you. It is no longer credited to your account. Your account is clear.

But that is only half the story. That is only half of the good news. There’s more! Verse 6 says, “God counts righteousness.” And that informs our understanding of verses 3 and 5 as well. Faith is the instrument by which we receive this gift, and the gift is righteousness. A righteousness which is not our own is reckoned to our account. That was the case for Abraham. And that is the case for any who will put their faith and confidence and hope in Jesus Christ, our only Savior.

2 Corinthians 5:21 is a concise summary of what is involved in God declaring us righteous. This is a verse you should become familiar with, if you’re not already. Paul writes, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Do you hear the two imputations in that verse? Our sin is imputed to Christ, and His righteousness is imputed to us.

Picture two robes. One is brilliant and clean, the other is filthy and tattered. Christ wears the spotless robe, signifying His purity and perfection and righteousness. We wear the filthy and tattered robe, representing our sin and guilt and shame. But at the moment one puts his or her trust in Christ, the robes are exchanged. Christ takes the tattered and shameful robe and goes to the cross to pay the penalty we deserve. And He clothes us in the pure robe of His own righteousness.

As a result of this exchange, we are no longer under God’s wrath, but instead we are in a right relationship with Him. God now looks at us as righteous on the basis of Christ. We are justified, declared righteous, because of our union to Christ. His righteousness is counted as belonging to us.

In closing I want to read a quote from John Bunyan, who lived in the 1600s and wrote the famous Christian allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*. He is a man whose life was changed by this doctrine of justification by faith alone, much like Luther. Here’s what Bunyan wrote about justification and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. I love this quote, and I hope it will encourage you as it has encouraged me.

“One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. [Your] righteousness is in heaven. And . . . I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God’s right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he lacks my righteousness, for that was [right in front of] him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, ‘The same yesterday, today, and forever’ (Heb 13:8). Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [about the unforgivable sin] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God.”

Bunyan, like Luther, thought he was under the judgment of God. But this amazing truth is what gave him hope. This truth that my standing before God does not depend on any righteousness that is in me, but rather it depends on the righteousness of Christ alone.

When Bunyan writes of a good frame and a bad frame, he is talking about his spiritual condition. It’s like the phrase, “frame of mind.” Bunyan speaks of his “frame of heart.” So here’s an encouragement for us, in times when we’re feeling discouraged in our spiritual walk. Even in a bad frame, your standing before God is not diminished in the least. For Christ is our righteousness. And, on the other hand, here is an exhortation for us. When we are feeling very encouraged in our walk with the Lord, when God is giving us victory over sin and our fellowship with Christ is sweet, that doesn’t make our righteousness any better. We must not boast in ourselves. For Christ is our righteousness.

As we sang this morning in the hymn “The Solid Rock,” “I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.” And in a later verse, “Dressed in His righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.” That’s our great confidence this morning, for all who are found to be in Christ. There is no question about our righteousness. There is no question about our standing with God. We lean on Jesus’ name. We are dressed in His righteousness. And therefore, sinners as we are, yet we are faultless to stand before the throne. Wonder of wonders, God justifies the ungodly.