

Summary: Paul has said that justification does not come by works of the law, but by faith, yet he claims to uphold the law. How? First, through Abraham – whom the Jews said was the perfect law-keeper. But Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith – and that before he was circumcised (4:1-8). The sign of circumcision was a seal – not of his faith – but of the righteousness that he had by faith. Therefore Abraham is the father of all who believe (whether circumcised or not) (4:9-12).

Romans is emphatically about the *gospel*–
the good news of what Jesus Christ has accomplished
for the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles.

In Romans 1-2 Paul demonstrates that both Gentiles and Jews are under God’s wrath and curse, as he summarizes the situation in chapter 3,

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.”

“Both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin.” (3:9)

Therefore, Paul concludes, “by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” (3:20)

This doesn’t sound like good news, does it?

You are all under the power of sin,
and there is nothing you can do to save yourself.

And if that was the whole story, then I suppose that would be pretty bad news!

But God has provided a way to be right with him.

At the end of chapter 3 Paul explains what he means by this.

*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law,
although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it–
the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*

God is is a righteous judge.

The problem is, how can a righteous judge justify sinners?

Only if his righteous judgment is satisfied.

And that is why God “put forward” Jesus “as a propitiation”--
as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Jesus took the penalty for our sin in order to show God’s righteousness,
because the only way for a just God to justify sinners
is if he first deals with sin.

In 3:27-31, Paul says that God is not only the God of the Jews, but also of the Gentiles, and he will justify both Jews and Gentiles in the same way—by faith.

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (3:28)

But Paul recognizes that some people will hear this as an attack on the law.

Is Paul overthrowing the law of Moses? (v31)

To that, Paul says μη γένοιτο (may it never be).

Rather, we uphold the law.

Okay, Paul, prove it!

You say that we are justified by faith, apart from works of the law,
but then you say that you uphold the law – show us how!

That is what Romans 4 is all about.

Romans 4 is Paul's demonstration from the law his point regarding justification by faith.

1. Abraham Believed God (4:1-3)

That's why he starts with Abraham.

You must remember that Genesis is part of the Torah,
so for a Jewish audience, Genesis is part of the "law."

Paul says that if Abraham was justified by works, then he has something to boast about—
but not before God.

Paul says that even *if* Abraham could have been justified by works,
that would not give him grounds for boasting before God.

In Jewish tradition, Abraham was as perfect as they come.

He was the model of righteousness according to the law.

The rabbis admitted that Abraham did not have the Mosaic law written out for him,
but they argued that he kept it fully anyway!

(Because he was a righteous man)

Paul does not seek to dispute this by saying—hey, look, Abraham sinned too!

Too often we start by trying to prove that everyone is a sinner.

Remember what Paul did in Romans 1-2?

He didn't try to "prove" that everyone is a sinner.

He pointed out that everyone *knows* that he is a sinner!

Everyone knows God.

Everyone knows that God is just.

Everyone knows that they have sinned against God.

And so when he deals with Abraham,
the one whom the Jews viewed as the perfect example of law-keeping,
Paul doesn't try to say "he's a sinner too,"
Rather, he points to Genesis 15:6 and says,
Abraham was not justified by works,
Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Paul points out that even the most righteous man who ever lived
was justified by faith, apart from works of the law.

The Greek word here, λογίζομαι, means to reckon to one's account; to impute,
or "to enter in the account book"

And particularly here, we find the phrase "it was reckoned to him as righteousness."
This is a legal declaration.

This phrase "And it was reckoned to him as righteousness,"
is used one other time in the OT: Psalm 106:31,
referring to Phineas and his zeal for the LORD in Numbers 25.

In Numbers 25, Israel turns aside to worship Baal,
being led by their foreign wives.
In the midst of the national repentance,
as all the people of Israel are weeping before the LORD,
Zimri the Simeonite brought a Midianite wife home with him.
Phineas, the son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron the high priest,
saw this and responded by killing both the man and his idolatrous wife.

And the LORD promised Phineas a perpetual priesthood
"because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel."

Psalm 106:31 reflects on this and says that his zeal "was reckoned to him as righteousness."

These are the two places in the OT that talk about reckoning something for righteousness.
Genesis 15:6 – which speaks of God reckoning Abraham's faith for righteousness;
Psalm 106:31 – which speaks of God reckoning Phineas' zeal for righteousness.

In both cases there is a legal verdict where God imputes righteousness.
In both cases the reward is far greater than what is deserved:
Phineas' zeal for the LORD was merely what was commanded of him.
He did no more than the law required –
and yet God imputed righteousness to him by virtue of his zeal,

and gave Phineas an everlasting priesthood because of it.
Abraham's faith in the LORD was also merely what God commanded.
He believed God's promise,
and yet God imputed righteousness to him because of his faith,
and gave Abraham an everlasting inheritance.

So why does Paul cite Genesis 15:6 and ignore Psalm 106:31?

Look at verses 9-12.

We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

How then was it counted to him?

Was it before or after he had been circumcised?

Before.

Why is that important?

*The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe
without being circumcised,*

so that righteousness would be counted to them as well.

It is true that God reckoned Phineas's zeal for righteousness,
but Paul's point in Romans 3-4 is not "how does God judge his own people?"
Rather, the question is "how can a just God justify the ungodly?"

And since Paul has just finished making it emphatically clear
that both Jews and Gentiles are ungodly,
the solution for both Jews and Gentiles will be the same:
the faith of Abraham.

2. Works vs. Faith: Wages vs. Gift (4-8)

Verses 4-5 then practically explain themselves:

now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.

And to the one who does not work, but trusts him who justifies the ungodly,

his faith is counted as righteousness

Paul here sets forth two basic principles:

the principle of works: that of earning wages

the principle of grace: a freely given gift.

And based on everything that Paul has said, it is perfectly clear
that even Abraham – the most righteous man ever –
is justified by grace as a gift.

And Paul then demonstrates this by a quotation from Psalm 32.

Just as David also speaks of the blessing

of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:
Remember that Paul had said that the Law and the Prophets
bear witness to the righteousness of God
that has now been manifested apart from the law.

Paul started with Abraham,
showing that the law does indeed bear witness to the righteousness of faith,
because Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.
Now he turns to David,
and the blessing of the one to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works.

*Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin.*

If Genesis 15:6 is the positive statement that God reckons faith as righteousness,
Psalm 32 explains the same principle in the negative.

Notice the three steps of verses 7-8:

whose lawless deeds are forgiven

It might be better to translate this “whose lawlessness is forgiven”
It is talking about our sinful condition.

Whose sins are covered

This refers to the atoning sacrifice which covers our sins.

It is talking about the specific sins that we have committed.

Against whom the Lord will not count his sin

This is the most remarkable statement of the three.

God, the righteous judge, who will not tolerate sin,
nonetheless looks at you and does not impute sin to you.

Think about that.

Have you sinned?

(Silly question, right?!)

But God, who is unquestionably a just judge, says

“I do not consider him a sinner.

I find no guilt in this man.”

But of course that is the necessary conclusion

if your lawlessness (your sinful condition) is forgiven,

and your sins (your actual iniquities) are covered by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus,
then God would be *unjust* to find you guilty.

That is why John will say in 1 John 1,

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful *and just* to forgive us our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

God is *just* to forgive sins

because he has covered them with the blood of Jesus.

If your sins are atoned for,

if the price has already been paid,

then God would be unjust to reckon those sins to your account.

And Paul says that this idea of justification by faith
is precisely what the Law and the Prophets taught.

You can think back to Deuteronomy 9:4-5,

where God told Israel that it was not because of their righteousness that

he would give them the land,

but because of his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

God had not yet *manifested* his righteousness in the OT.

He had given many signs, many pictures of it.

He had borne witness to it over and over again.

So the Old Testament *always* taught justification by faith apart from works of the law.

What is new in the NT is not justification by faith alone.

What is new is that Gentiles are included apart from circumcision.

3. Righteousness and Circumcision (4:9-12)

And that is the point that Paul turns to in verses 9-12.

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?

We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

How then was it counted to him?

Was it before or after he had been circumcised?

It was not after, but before he was circumcised.

Even the man whom the Jews considered to be the most faithful law-keeper in all of history
was reckoned righteous by faith –

and that *before* he had been circumcised!

So if Abraham, the most righteous of all men, was justified by faith,

before he was circumcised,

then circumcision *cannot* be a prerequisite for justification!

Circumcision is all fine and good for Jews,

but it is not necessary for Gentiles.

That which identifies the true child of Abraham
is faith in Jesus Christ.

But then, what was circumcision about?

*He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith
while he was still uncircumcised.*

Notice that circumcision was not a sign of his faith.

(You sometimes hear people say that baptism, for instance, is a sign of faith.)

But the sign of circumcision was not a sign of faith.

Rather, it was a seal of the *righteousness* that he had by faith
while he was still uncircumcised.

Circumcision is a sign.

And that sign is itself a seal of righteousness.

And the righteousness is something which Abraham received by faith.

Circumcision was not a sign of faith it was a seal of righteousness –
it was a seal that Abraham was right with God.

But circumcision did not *make* Abraham right with God.

Rather, it was a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith.

Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

The sign of circumcision was then given as a seal of that same righteousness.

*The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised,
so that righteousness would be counted to them as well,
and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised
but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had
before he was circumcised. (v11-12)*

Paul says that circumcision was given as a sign to Abraham
so that he might be the father of all who have faith.

Paul is saying that if you do not share Abraham's faith,
then you are not Abraham's seed.

Circumcision alone does not make you an heir of Abraham.

Paul is simply saying the same thing that Jesus said in John 8:39,
when the Jews answered him "Abraham is our Father,"

Jesus replied, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did."

In fact, Jesus goes so far as to say “You are of your father the devil.”

Circumcision cannot make you a child of Abraham,
because Abraham is the father of the circumcised
who walk in the footsteps of the faith that Abraham had
before he was circumcised.

And for that matter,
Abraham is also the father of those who believe without being circumcised.

What makes you a child of Abraham is not circumcision – not biological descent,
but faith.

You can see here Paul’s basic sacramental theology.
Sacraments do not replace faith.
Rather, they are signs and seals of the righteousness that we receive only by faith.

It is not enough to be circumcised (or baptized).
You must believe God, like Abraham.

Conclusion

All of this (verses 1-12 of chapter 4)
has been Paul’s defense against the charge that he is overthrowing the law.

Paul’s point is that the law itself calls us to faith in Christ.
The Law and the Prophets bear witness to the righteousness
that is now revealed in Jesus Christ
and received by faith apart from works of the law.

Now, what is the point of this?
We’ll see more next week about the implications of this,
but I would like to remind you of where we started this study.

In Romans 1 Paul says that his mission – indeed the purpose of the gospel –
is to bring about the obedience of faith
for the sake of Christ’s name among the nations.

In Romans 4 we are beginning to see what this means.
The obedience of faith is NOT like the works of the law.
The obedience of faith does NOT seek to earn salvation.
The obedience of faith believes the promises of God.
The obedience of faith does not boast,
but trusts him who justifies the ungodly.

If your lawlessness is forgiven,

if your sins are covered by the blood of the lamb,
if God will not count your sin against you,
 then you are to live out the obedience of faith –
 not fearing, wondering whether you are good enough
 (you're not! So get over it!)
but rather remembering God's great love and mercy in Jesus Christ.