

THE OLD, OLD STORY, PT. 2
ROMANS 4:1-8

When I was in seminary, the church Raye Jeanne and I were part of trained its members in evangelism with the Evangelism Explosion materials. I went through the program and eventually also became a trainer for EE. One semester, one of my trainees was a fellow seminary student who came to be a good friend. One evening as we were returning to the church after sharing the gospel, he asked something like this, "I know the gospel is about eternity with Christ and getting people to Heaven, but what good is the gospel *now*?"

He was asking a question that has been asked many times and while I don't remember what I said then (I don't think I had a good answer then), I know what I'd say today: "The gospel is essential because it frees people from God's wrath so they can get to Heaven, but it also liberates people from the bondage of sin so they can live free of sin today!" In other words, the gospel and the process of justification isn't only about what will happen in the future; justification also has implications for today.

As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, the story of the gospel of justification by faith is an old, old "story." It is not just a New Testament truth and doctrine, but it is also the story of how all men everywhere in every generation have always been saved from God's wrath. Justification is true for New Testament believers since the time of Christ and it was also true for Old Testament believers, as evidenced by the lives of Abraham and David.

But of what value is this justification by faith? What does the believer receive from God when he is justified? That's the question that Paul answers in Romans 4:6-8, and he answers it from the teaching of David, as quoted in Psalm 32.

What does Paul say in these verses? He teaches that:

THE OLD TESTAMENT TESTIFIES TO JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE.

Is that truth significant for us? It is *most* significant. It is, in fact, essential. It is essential:

- ✓ It is essential if *we* want to know and experience salvation from God's wrath.
- ✓ It is essential if we want to know how to tell others how to experience salvation from God's wrath.

If we are going to tell the story of the gospel rightly, we must know the process of justification accurately.

And that is going to be Paul's theme throughout Romans 4.

In chapter three, Paul has explained justification by faith, and now in chapter four he defends justification by faith alone by using the illustration of Abraham. If Abraham, the father of Israel, was justified by faith, then certainly all men will likewise need justification by faith. And now in verses 6-8, Paul — through the quotation from David's psalm — reveals four blessings for the believer that come from justification.

Let's look at these opening verses in chapter 4 by asking three questions:

1. What if Justification Was By WORKS? (vv. 1-3)
2. What is the NATURE of Justification? (vv. 4-5)
3. What are Some BLESSINGS of Justification by Faith? (vv. 6-8)
 - ✓ There is IMPUTED righteousness! (v. 6)
 - ✓ There is FORGIVENESS for rebellion (v. 7a)
 - ✓ There is GRACE for every sin (v. 7b)
 - ✓ There is NO imputed sin (v. 8)

1. What if Justification Was By WORKS? (vv. 1-3)

- When Paul says, ***what shall we say then*** (v. 1), he is going back to his original argument in 3:27-28 — there is no boasting in justification and justification is by works only and not by faith. Now he proves it in the life of Abraham, and in doing that he answers the question, “what if justification was by works?”
- There would be boasting for man (vv. 1-2)
 - ✓ Paul addresses the premise of his opponents — ***If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about***; and if true, then his premise in 3:27 & justification by faith is destroyed.
 - ✓ But Paul quickly dismisses that idea when he says, ***but not before God***. Man — not even Abraham — can boast before God about his righteousness. It is impossible for Abraham to be justified by works. He did nothing to merit God accounting him to be righteous.
 - ✓ No man anywhere can correctly say, “I am not in need of God.” Everyone needs God. There is no boasting for many in the presence of the Triune God; so there is no justification by works.
- It would be contrary to Scripture (v. 3)
 - ✓ To defend his statement that he says no one can boast he says, ***What does Scripture say?***
 - ✓ And Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 (also Gal. 3:6; Js. 2:23). And there Moses emphasizes the belief of Abraham — instead of working, Abraham believed. And belief is no work — when it says, ***Abraham believed God***, it means he recognized that he could not do what God had promised.
 - ✓ And this is the same kind of faith that sinners still must exhibit for salvation: to believe in God is to entrust oneself to His care and to affirm dependence on Him for salvation from His wrath. The believer entrusts Himself to the One who is justly angry with him, to spare him from His wrath.
 - ✓ And through that faith, Moses says, ***it was credited to him as righteousness***. The word “credit” is used 11x in Romans 4 (vv. 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24) and means to “account” to another.
 - ✓ So if there was such a thing as justification by works, it would be contrary to the message of Scripture. To be saved by works would mean man could boast more than God and it would mean Scripture is a lie. Justification is not and never has been by works. For justification to be by works would leave mankind with nothing that we need from God.

2. What is the NATURE of Justification? (vv. 4-5)

- There are only two options for justification: it is either by man’s good works and merit, or it is by God’s grace, through faith.

- It is by MERIT through WORKS (v. 4)

- ✓ When one works, then he doesn't receive grace, he receives **what is due**. He has received what another is obligated to give. The one who employs him is indebted to him until the wage is paid.
- ✓ When Paul says that if salvation is by works, then it is **what is due**, he really is asking his opponents, "do you *really* want salvation to be something God is indebted to give you? Really?"
- ✓ But there is another option for salvation — and that is that it comes by grace through faith...

- Or, it is by GRACE alone through FAITH alone (v. 5)

- ✓ Instead of working for justification, one simply **believes in Him who justifies**. His belief is not a work and not a merit, but an act of dependence on God — "I can't; you must!" And he is careful about the object of his faith — he *only* believes in **Him who justifies**.
 - ✓ Someone has rightly said that, "the whole...gospel could be summed up in this one word — God who justifies the ungodly."
 - ✓ And then notice the end for the one who believes: **his faith is credited as righteousness!**
 - This is the clearest statement in this passage about imputed justification by faith.
 - When one believes in Christ and rejects his own righteousness for salvation, that faith (that act of dependence on God alone) is credited — accounted, imputed — as righteousness. When he depends on God, God saves Him. (But if he refuses to depend on God, God will not save him.)
- What is the nature of justification? It is never by works and it is always and only by grace thru faith.

3. What are Some BLESSINGS of Justification by Faith? (vv. 6-8)

- Let's make a couple of observations from verse 6 as we begin:
 - ✓ Continuing the sentence from v. 5, "his faith is credited as righteousness," Paul now says "**just as David also speaks**." In other words, this is not just Paul's idea or Moses' idea, but also David's idea. This is a continuing thread of truth throughout Scripture.
 - ✓ And in quoting from both Moses and David, Paul is following the Jewish tradition of validating something from the mouth of two witnesses. It is as if he is making a case in a law court, and he has just validated his theory of justification.
 - ✓ And notice also the similarities between David and Abraham: — "Abraham is uncircumcised, David is a sinner; Abraham and David are both without good works; Abraham has faith in [God's promise] and hope in its fulfillment, David has hope in divine mercy." [Kruse, 207.]
 - ✓ And then Paul says that David affirmed there are blessings attached to justification — these are special favors that are received for **the man** (not just David!) who is graciously credited with righteousness by God. And these blessings are also all of grace! What are these favors?

- There is **IMPUTED** righteousness! (v. 6)

- ✓ First of all, Paul notes (again) that there is such a thing as imputed righteousness — and it's part of the blessing that the believer receives from God.
- ✓ In v. 5 Paul says that ***faith is credited as righteousness***; here he says that **God** is the One who does the crediting of righteousness. God is the only One who can declare unrighteous sinners to be righteous. A sinner cannot do it for himself or for anyone else. But through Christ (3:25-26), God can.
- ✓ This accreditation is a legal declaration about our status that leads to a genuine transformation. The sinner is deserving of Hell and condemnation and wrath and misery, but instead, the perfect righteous obedience of Christ is attributed to the sinner. And through that act, the sinner is then enabled to do righteous deeds that please the Lord and he is also able to not do sinful things that dishonor the Lord and invite God's judgment. *There is nothing comparable to this in the world.*
- ✓ This week I received a phone call from my credit card company. "Did you purchase two airline tickets in Pittsburg yesterday?" "No." "Did you eat at a Pizza Inn in Iowa yesterday?" "No." "Your card is compromised and we are canceling it immediately and issuing you a new card." (This is the second time on that card in about six weeks.) They also promised to credit my account for the fraudulent charges. And sure enough when my Quicken account logged in a couple of days later, I saw both the false charges and the credits.
 - But those credits were not grace. They were what I was owed; it was due to me to make something that was wrong, right. Those credits were like v. 4, not v. 5.
 - But then I noticed something else — I had *two* \$500 credits for the *one* fraudulent purchase of airline tickets. (By the time I went to call about it on Saturday the extra credit was removed.) But even if they had allowed me to keep that credit, while that would be a grace gift (an undeserved gift) that isn't like justification either, because it doesn't fundamentally change me. It gives me something that is nice, but I'm still the same person after the gift — I still have a credit card with all my monthly bills on it that needs to be paid off every month.
 - On the other hand, when the believer receives the gift of justification, it fundamentally changes both his status and his activity. He no longer has a debt. The debt is completely and permanently removed and his status is changed: cf. **Phil. 3:7-11**. There Paul affirms that all his previous "credit" was really "loss," and after being imputed with Christ's righteousness, he is "being conformed to His death" (and His likeness) and he will "attain to the resurrection from the dead." His life is changed both now and in the future. That's what the imputation of Christ's righteousness does. It changes us now and later.
- ✓ Friend, this is the blessing of imputed righteousness — it is a permanent change in your status and nature. Your identity is now, "Christ." You are in the family of God. God the Father treats you the same way He treats His Son. Sin is removed. You are able to do righteous deeds. You are new!
- ✓ And notice that Paul emphasizes that **David** says this. The words are from one of two psalms that he wrote after his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah. David didn't deserve justification any more than any of us did — his sin qualified him only for condemnation.

- ✓ Friend, this is a blessing. It's a gift and favor that has been granted to you apart from what might be owed to you. And that's only the beginning!

- There is **FORGIVENESS** for rebellion (v. 7a)

- ✓ Another blessing is the blessing of forgiveness. And Paul and David say that the forgiveness is specifically for **lawless deeds**.
- ✓ These lawless deeds are acts of rebellion against divine authority. They are deliberate acts against God's commands. It is an attempt to overthrow the authority of God from one's life. This rebellion is pictured in Scripture as deceitfulness (Prov. 28:24), apathy (Ps. 36:1), illness (Ps. 107:17), a love for strife (**Prov. 17:19**), a sense of enslavement (**Prov. 12:13**), easily angered (Prov. 29:22), hypocritical worship (Is. 58:1) and a sense of defilement (Ezk. 14:11), and as a heavy, crushing weight (**Is. 24:20**). [TWOT]
- ✓ This is the atheist and hater of God. These are the men of Rom. 1:32. They want to rid themselves of God and are unwilling to submit to Him in any way. (And this, friends, was every one of us.)
- ✓ This word is a reminder of the gravity and weight of sin. It's not a small offense. Sin is not trivial. Sin is not incidental. It is angry, rebellious, and the work of an insurrectionist. It is completely in the pattern of Satan who wanted to take over God's heavenly throne.
- ✓ And it is this kind of sin that Paul (and David) say is **forgiven**.
 - The essential idea of this word is that a load is lifted up, taken away, and removed. It's gone.
 - It's not the word that is used in Lev. 16, but the practice of imputing the sins on the scapegoat and then leading the goat into the wilderness pictures the removal of sin that is in this word. Notice **Lev. 16:21-22** — the priest puts his hand on the goat and confesses *all the sins* of the nation on the goat and the goat "bears on itself all the iniquities." And they are *gone*. That's a powerful picture of the forgiveness that David and Paul now mention.
 - Or picture a family on a backpacking trip; they are going to a remote location and carrying all their gear several miles to their rural campsite. After ¼ mile the youngest child is struggling with her load — "Daddy, I can't carry it any more." And she sits down and she starts to cry. So the father comes beside her and comforts her and takes off her load and adds it to his gear. She is freed from that load because her father has taken it from her. That is the picture of what sin does to us — our rebellion against God weighs us down under and oppressive weight. And God removes it from us and liberates us. The sin was crushing us with its weight; and now it is a problem no more!
- ✓ Is this a blessing and benefit? It obviously has implications for the future so that we can live with God in eternity and escape His wrath. But it is also liberating for us now! Notice how David describes the crushing weight of his sin (Ps. 32:3-4). Lack of confession was overwhelming. The guilty conscience was continually condemning David. And then when he confesses his sin, God forgives (v. 5) and it seems as though David virtually shouts for joy in gratitude and freedom. God forgives and the guilt is removed (v. 5b). This is a blessing indeed.

- There is GRACE for every sin (v. 7b)

- ✓ When Paul uses the word **sins** in v. 7 it is the most general and common word for sin in the NT.
 - It is the word that is generally translated “to miss the mark.” It has not met God’s standard.
 - It includes both willful (rebellious) and unknown sin. It can refer to premeditated and accidental sin. It means that the sinner has not done his duty.
 - And notice that here it is a plural form, so it refers not to the state or condition of the sinner but to all his deeds. Everything he has done in opposition to God and in pursuit of self is in this category and the number of sins that will be forgiven is limitless.
- ... Consider for a moment the worst of your sins. Paul identified some of the sins that had been practiced by the Corinthian church (**1 Cor. 6:9-10**). My guess is that those same sins are probably represented somewhere in this room. Or consider what Paul said about himself (**1 Tim. 1:13**). You should take comfort from those statements that your sin(s) are not beyond forgiveness. God can forgive anything you have done.
- ... Or maybe it’s not *what* you have done that is bothering you, but the *quantity* of what you have done. Have you ever found yourself confessing your daily sin and been humbled by the fact that you have been confessing the same kinds of sins day after day for weeks? months? years? decades? Maybe that has you concerned that God has a limit to how many of your sins he will forgive. Notice what Paul says: the **lawless deeds** and **sins** are forgiven. Whatever the quantity of your sins are, they can be forgiven thru Christ (1 Cor. 6:11).
- ✓ And Paul says, quoting David, that they are **covered**.
 - This word only appears here in the NT, but a related word is used two more times in the NT to indicate the same thing — **Is. 5:20**; 1 Pt. 4:8.
 - The word “cover” is used much more commonly in the OT, but rarely in relation to sin. It seems that “cover” is used by David as a parallel term for “forgive” but it has the added idea of atonement — that by grace the sin has been washed away by a blood sacrifice (Ps. 85:2).
 - For our sin to be “covered” means that it is gone and it has been atoned! Consider Ex. 34:7 (// Num. 14:18) and Mic. 7:18.
 - This doesn’t mean that the sin is forgotten by God (He is God; He cannot forget anything). It does mean that He chooses not to remember it (**Jer. 31:34**); He no longer holds it against the sinner.
- ✓ This phrase then is a reminder that for every sin — every sin — grace is available to atone for it and to pay God’s wrath against it.
- ✓ Is there a blessing now in justification? Oh yes! There is grace for *every — one — of — my — sins*.

- There is NO imputed sin (v. 8)

- ✓ One thing every unredeemed person is good at it sinning. It takes no effort to sin. No one trains their children to sin — it literally “comes naturally” — it is in their nature, hard-wired into their DNA to sin. And every sinner spends a lifetime cultivating that ability to sin.

- ✓ And Paul says there is one more blessing in justification. So far he has emphasized what God has *done* in justification — He has imputed righteousness, forgiven rebellion, and provided atonement for every kind of sin. And now Paul finally points to what God *doesn't* do in justification — He ***will not take (sin) into account...***
 - Paul is emphatic here, using a double negative, “He absolutely will not do this...”
 - This is the strongest form of denial — there is no possibility that He will ever do this.
 - When Paul says ***the Lord*** won't take these things into account, he means that God won't count our sins. God does not consider, meditate on, or think about the sins of the justified sinner.
 - Paul means by that that our sin is no longer on the ledger of our offenses; we no longer have a ledger of offenses (Col. 2:13-14).
 - And the emphasis is not just that this is an account of everything we've done, but the account is *against* us. It condemns us. It leads to a legal judgment of our guilt. And we cannot escape that declaration — until we have been justified.
 - We have lived our lives with our sins being counted up and considered against us, but through justification, that's all gone. Sin that really does belong to us is *not* counted against us. We've committed the sins; we've delighted in our rebellion against God and we are judged guilty for our sin. And God *will not* hold it against us.
- ✓ So here we have a double blessing in justification —
 - A righteousness that does not belong to us is granted to us.
 - And a guilt of sin that *does* belong to us is not counted against us.
- So let's ask the question again — is there any kind of blessing and value in justification? Is it worth spending weeks talking about the justifying work of Christ? Oh yes! We are blessed people indeed — we who have put our trust in Christ for salvation.
- And friend, if you are not trusting in Christ for salvation, you have no blessing from God.
 - ✓ You do not have the righteousness of Christ.
 - ✓ You are not forgiven.
 - ✓ Your sins have not been atoned.
 - ✓ Your sin is still imputed and counted against you. You are guilty.
 - ✓ But all that can change if you will trust in Christ — confessing your sin, asking for forgiveness, and asking for the Spirit of God to change you from a rebel against God into a lover of God.
 - ✓ I encourage you most strongly to place your trust in Christ this very day so that you too can know the blessings of justification.

CONCLUSION:

I hear the accuser roar

Of ills that I have done;

I know them all, and thousands more,

Jehovah [findeth] none.

Though the restless foe accuses —

Sins recounting like the flood,

Ev'ry charge our God refuses;

Christ has answered with His blood.

This is the blessing that comes from and through the justifying work of Christ.

BENEDICTION: Jude 24-25