

The Gospel Story: Like Abraham

A Study of Romans

Romans 4:1-25

Pastor Bryan Clark

If you could think of anyone in all of history who could possibly be good enough to be justified by their works, who would that be? Oh we could probably talk about some names that we'd throw out, but what about this? The very first verse of the New Testament—Matthew, Chapter one, Verse 1—starts with the genealogy, the family tree of Jesus, and describes Jesus as *the son of David, the son of Abraham*—two of the marquee names of the Old Testament. So let's start with them. Do you think it's possible that these great men of faith, the great King David and father Abraham could possibly be justified by works? That's what we want to talk about this morning. But I'd ask you to consider this possibility: If it becomes obvious that even these great men of faith could not possibly be good enough for God, then wouldn't it be reasonable to conclude that none of us are either?

If you have a Bible, turn with us to Romans, Chapter 4. Last week we looked at one of the most hope-filled, beautiful paragraphs in all of the Bible where Paul reminded us that on the basis of Jesus becoming the propitiation for sin—that Jesus became the payment for sin—that God can remain just and declare sinful people to be righteous in His presence. But it's all by faith, nothing to do with works. He summarizes it in Chapter 3, verse 28: *“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works...”*

But one can imagine these religious Jews responding they don't agree with that because they believe they themselves were perhaps good enough. So Paul is going to argue this by saying, “Okay, let's think about this. Let's think about our great father, Abraham. If Abraham wasn't good enough to be justified by works, then wouldn't it be fair to conclude no one is good enough?” Verse 1:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about...

(*NASB, Romans 4:1-2a)

So he starts with, “Let's think about **Abraham, our forefather**.” Abraham would have been the greatest figure of faith that these people knew of. He says, **“If it's possible that he was justified by works, he would have something to boast in.”** Now the Jewish rabbis did believe that Abraham was that good. They did believe he was justified on the basis of his obedience, on the basis of his works. I think part of what Paul is referring to is people that are highly moral, religious people tend to have kind of a mutual admiration society. They convince each other that they're good enough; they pat each other on the back. And so that is kind of the imagery of Abraham. If he was in their circle, they'd be patting him on the back and saying, “Abe, you're good enough.” And so Paul says, “You know, if he was that good, he'd have something to boast about,

...but not before God.” (vs. 2b)

He reminds them that, at the end of the day, there is only one opinion that matters, and God doesn't share their opinion. He's not good enough. Verse 3:

For what does the Scripture say? “ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

That statement comes from Genesis, Chapter 15, Verse 6 and virtually all theologians agree that was the statement of Abraham’s conversion. That was the moment when he was justified. In Genesis, chapter 12, God comes to Abraham and calls him out of his homeland and promises that, “*Abraham, I will be your God, and I will make you into a great people; and through your seed all the nations of the world will be blessed if you just trust Me.*” And Abraham believed. Much as we talked about last week, this was not an intellectual assent. He actually put his trust in God’s promise to the degree that he put his entire family at risk. They actually pulled up stakes and headed for a land that they had never known but had been promised, which was his way of saying, “I believe you.”

But by Genesis 15, Abraham was starting to wonder about this promise. He was getting older and older and starting to think: *I may be getting a little too old to have children, so I’m not going to be able to have a seed that would become a great nation.* So he said to God, “I’m thinking maybe we should consider Plan B.” And God said, “No Plan B. I made a promise; I’ll keep the promise.” **And Abraham believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness.** The word **credited** there is an accounting term. It was credited to his account.

Last week when we defined *justification* we talked about the fact that we stand before God clothed in the robe of our sin. It’s dirty; it’s stained; it’s offensive. But because Jesus became the propitiation for our sin, because he paid the debt for that sin, if we believe by faith, God is willing to remove the robe of our sin and replace it with a robe of His righteousness so that when God looks at us, He literally sees His own righteousness. That will never be changed. It will never be lost. It will never be stained. It will never be diminished. It’s how God sees us now and forever. That’s what it means to be justified. Paul uses just a little different terminology with Abraham: that the righteousness of God was *credited* to his account because he believed—in other words, *by faith*. Verse 4:

Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.

That phrase **as what is due** is literally *not according to grace*. So Paul is saying that when you work eight hours for someone and they pay you for that work, they’re not doing you a favor. It’s not according to grace. It’s what you’ve earned. That’s what a wage is. You have every right to expect that.

But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness. (vs. 5)

To the one who does not work, this is then not a wage. It’s not earned. It’s not a *right*, but is rather a gift of God’s grace because you believe. Now a couple things in this verse: There are those who would push it so far as to say: “Believing is actually a work.” Paul would disagree with that. Look at the verse. He clearly identifies belief *in contrast* to works. It’s a non-work; it’s an un-work. It’s simply believing the work has been done. What does he believe? He **believes in Him who justifies the ungodly**. It doesn’t say *who justifies the high achievers, the really religious people like father Abraham*. As a matter of fact, the text *is* calling Abraham ungodly.

If that phrase does not sound somewhat scandalous to you, I would suggest you still don't get it. What right does God have to declare the ungodly righteous? Now think about this: If a rapist, if a murderer came and stood before a judge, and the evidence was overwhelming that this person was guilty, what right would a judge have to stand in the courtroom and say, "This person is righteous"? But that's exactly what God does. He **justifies the ungodly**. How can He do that? It's based on the fact that His Son Jesus paid the debt of that sin. And having covered that sin, He has the right to declare the ungodly to be righteous. We've seen this word *ungodly* before. It shows up in Chapter 1, Verse 18: *For the wrath of God is against all ungodliness*. Until Abraham believed, he was under the condemnation of God. He was under sin. He was considered ungodly by a Holy God. **His faith is credited to His account as righteousness.** Now he uses David as another example:

... just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. (vs. 6)

So David clearly identifies that his own righteousness was not something he earned. It wasn't his wage, but rather *by faith* it was credited to his account. Then Paul quotes David's confession from Psalm 32:

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN,
AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.
BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO
ACCOUNT."** (VS. 7-8)

Psalm 32 was David's confession after his sin with Bathsheba. He stands before God guilty of adultery and guilty of murder, and so he is celebrating that this is a God who doesn't credit righteousness according to works. He doesn't give him what he's earned. What is the basis by which he says that? Well he tells us in his confession. "**Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven.**" The Greek language has several words for *forgiven*. This is a word that means *to carry away, to remove away*. He follows that by the statement, **whose sins have been covered**. This is the idea of the propitiation, that the sins have been covered by the blood of Jesus.

Now those two concepts should sound familiar. We talked about them last week. David was very familiar with the theology of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the day when there would be two goats. One would be the scapegoat upon which the sins of the people symbolically were placed, and he was removed. He was taken away, symbolizing those sins removed or taken away from their presence. The other one would be a sacrifice, and the blood would be poured through the mercy seat, representing the blood covering the sins of the people. Those are the two concepts David identifies. Clearly he's referring to the Day of Atonement. He knows his theology: that God has taken his sin away, that God has covered his sin, that Jesus became that propitiation for sin, to the degree that he says God does not credit his sin to his account.

Now think about what he just said. He is in the midst of a confession that he has committed adultery, that he has committed murder. And yet, even in the midst of his confession, he states that God will not credit that sin to his account. Why? Because by faith he believed that God justifies the ungodly. What he is saying is that when you are declared to be *right* in the presence of God, that righteousness is not a wage because of good works. It's not earned by good works, but it's also not lost by bad works because it's not *your* righteousness. It's not what *you* have earned. It is the righteousness of God. It can't be changed. It can't be lost. It can't be stained. It can't be diminished. It is the righteousness of God forever.

The Jewish rabbis taught that Psalm 32 only applied to the Jewish people, the circumcised. They were God's favorites, and so they could apply that, but no one else. Paul says, "Let's talk about that." Verse 9:

Is this blessing then on the circumcised or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." How then was it credited? (vs. 9-10a)

So they're saying the promise is only to the circumcised. And Paul is saying, "Let's think about that a little bit. How was it credited to Abraham?" In other words, was it credited on the basis of faith or on the basis of works (works meaning circumcision)? The question of *how* is answered around the question of *when*.

While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised. (vs. 10b-12)

Okay, what's he saying there? It's actually quite radical. Genesis 15:6 is the statement, "Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness." The question Paul is asking is, "When was that statement made? Before or after circumcision?" Circumcision doesn't even enter into the picture until Genesis, Chapter 17—two chapters later—probably even more importantly, at least a minimum of thirteen years later. We know from the details of the story it was at least thirteen. Jewish tradition had it as twenty-nine years later. So the argument that Paul is making is that circumcision could not have had anything to do with this justification because he was justified thirteen years before he was circumcised.

Then he says something really radical. He says, "Actually, if you want to get technical about it, Abraham was justified when he was an uncircumcised Gentile." He was an uncircumcised Gentile long before he was a circumcised Jew." The question would be: why did he do that? The answer is in the text: in order that he might be the father of all the uncircumcised Gentiles who would ever believe.

So we as Gentiles could actually say he was our father first. Why did God do that? The text tells us: in order that it might be clear that the promise to Abraham was for the nations—every tribe and tongue and nation. It was never intended to be restricted to the circumcised Jew only. So before he was ever the father of the circumcised Jewish people, he was the father of the uncircumcised Gentiles who would believe down through history. And then he adds, "He's also the father of the circumcised, but not *just* the circumcised, the circumcised who believe and believe like uncircumcised Abraham did." So Abraham was justified apart from works. He was justified apart from circumcision. One can imagine now the objection: Well, what about the Law? Certainly once the Law enters the picture, didn't everything change? Verse 13:

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. But if those who are of the Law are heirs...meaning are justified...faith is made void and the promise is

nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation. (vs. 13-15)

So you could imagine the objectors saying, “Well, what about the Law?” Paul would make the argument to the Galatians that Abraham’s justification could not have had anything to do with the Law because the Law came four hundred thirty years later. But what he says here is that the faith of Abraham is what was credited to his account as righteousness. But if one single person, on the basis of keeping the Law, became an heir (in other words was justified), then at that point **faith is void and the promise is nullified**. In other words, what he is saying is: if it’s possible that someone could be good enough, then it’s no longer of faith and the promise is off.

Paul makes a similar argument in the book of Galatians when he says, “*If, on the basis of keeping the Law you can make yourself righteous, then grace is nullified.*” If you add one single work to grace, then grace ceases to be grace; faith is void; the promise is nullified, and you’re on your own. In order to keep the Law, you must keep every point of the Law perfectly every day of your life. This is very important to understand. The first century religious Jews that Paul was writing to, some of them may very well have been Christians; they would have believed in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. They would celebrate, in our terms, Christmas and Easter. They would have embraced salvation by grace through faith. They would have simply said, “Salvation by grace through faith *plus...*” “At least you need to be circumcised.” “At least you need to be Jewish.” “At least you need to keep the Law.”

The very same problem concerns us today. You have many, many Christian church denominations that would say, “It’s salvation by grace through faith.” They celebrate Christmas. They celebrate Easter. They would quickly embrace the message of the gospel to where it sounds like they’re saying the exact same thing. But once you drill down a little bit, what you find out is: it’s salvation by grace through faith...*plus...*baptism...*plus...*communion...*plus...*keeping the Sabbath...*plus...* whatever you want to put in there. “Jesus’ work was really good, but not quite enough. There’s got to be this little thing *we do* as well.” The logic by which most people rationalize this goes like this: As long as they believe in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, as long as they embrace the core message, what does it really hurt? You know, it doesn’t hurt to cover all the bases, maybe get a little extra credit, you know, maybe do a few more things just in case maybe that’s included too! And so people think of it as *being safe*. What does it hurt to just add a few more works to the message of grace?

Look at the text. That is not safe at all! At that point, **faith is made void and the promise is nullified**. Grace ceases to be grace when you add one single work to it. Most of those denominations would deny that they add one single work to what Jesus did on the cross. They would say, “We believe in salvation by grace through faith. It was all Jesus!” And they would maintain that position...*until* you choose to leave that denomination. And then they remind you: *you cannot get to God without us*. And at that point the jig is up. They’ve been exposed. You don’t need any denomination to merit righteousness with God. It’s salvation by grace through faith alone. No works allowed!

So Abraham was justified apart from works, apart from circumcision, apart from the Law, and finally apart from sight. He had to believe *by faith*.

For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the

Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, (as it is written, “A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU”) in the presence of Him whom he believed, *even* God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, “SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE.” Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore IT WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. (vs. 16-22)

God made a promise to Abraham that *through his seed the nations of the world would be blessed*. That would require Abraham to have a son, but Abraham was getting very old. When it says in verse 18—**in hope against hope**, that phrase actually means he hoped even when it was unreasonable to hope by human standards. Now think about this: He’s 80...he’s 85...he’s 90...he’s 95...he’s approaching 100...no children! Human reason would say: *Abraham, it’s probably not going to happen*. Imagine the conversations he may have had with his friends. They probably did an intervention and said, “Abraham, ol’ buddy! Man, we love you, but you and Sarah, you need to let this thing go! You’re 100! She’s 90! I mean you better think of adopting! This is never gonna happen!” But the text says there was one factor: God had made a promise, and Abraham was unwilling to not believe the promise. So he believed, even against all human hope, and God fulfilled His promise and gave him a son. And eventually through that son and through the seed of Abraham would come the Messiah, through whom the nations of the world would be blessed. You say, “Why is he telling us that?” Verse 23:

Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, *He* who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our transgressions. (vs. 23-25)

That we might have the faith of Abraham—that we might believe that God tells the truth—that He is a God who justifies the ungodly on the basis of what Jesus has done on our behalf. Jesus being turned *over* is a phrase of a sacrifice—being handed over to be slaughtered—that he was handed over to the cross, the resurrection affirming our justification. Basically what that means is: the resurrection gave evidence that the payment was indeed accepted. God’s wrath was satisfied. The evidence was the resurrection.

So what Paul is saying is that we choose to believe that God tells the truth. The historical facts of the gospel story can be investigated. They can be researched. There’s lots of evidence to support that the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus are indeed true. But I cannot prove to you the effect of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. That you must believe *by faith*. You must decide in your own heart whether or not you believe God tells the truth when He says, “*On the basis of that work, I am willing to justify the ungodly for those who believe by faith.*”

I would suggest to you that there are far too many Christians who still identify themselves by their shame, by their guilt, by their struggles, by their failures, by their sin. That still remains their identity and, because of that, they continue to struggle through life day after day after day, never really experiencing the joy and the freedom that God desires you to have. And typically it’s

reasoned out or justified like this: “I’ve messed up so much. I’ve sinned. I have all this shame; I have all this guilt so I’m really thankful I believe that Jesus died for my sins. I accept Him as my Savior, and He’s given me a ticket to Heaven, and if that’s all I get, that’s way more than I deserve, and so I’m just thankful to have that.” And we think of that as humility. Friends, that *is not* humility. That is simply unbelief. You simply lack the courage to believe God tells the truth when God has the audacity, when God is so radical as to say, *“On the basis of what Jesus has done on the cross, to those who believe, I am willing to declare the ungodly righteous in My presence now and forever.”*

My prayer would be that each one of us would have the courage to believe that. It’s not what we’ve earned. It’s not our wage. It is a gift of God’s grace. But I am telling you this: When you begin to see yourself as God sees you, it will change the way you live!

Our Father, we are thankful that Your word is so audacious, so radical, that You would introduce a concept so scandalous that it’s hard to comprehend that You Yourself would become the payment for sin, that on the basis of faith that we would just believe You tell the truth, that You are willing in the courts of Heaven to declare that we, as people who were ungodly, stand before You in perfect righteousness, now and forever. Lord, give us the faith; give us the eyes to see ourselves the way You see us, that we might live in the joy and the freedom that You desire for us to know. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. Why is it so hard to believe we are justified apart from works? What makes grace such a hard concept to simply accept?
2. Based on your answer to the question above, what makes religion so popular?
3. What are some practical ways we can help good moral people see that their works, good as they might be, are not good enough to erase their sin which separates them from God?

Bible Study

1. Do a quick review of Romans 3:21-26. What is the basis for salvation?
2. Review Romans 3:28. Compare Ephesians 2:8-9. What is the role of good works in accomplishing our salvation according to Paul in these passages?
3. Read Romans 4:1-8. Is salvation according to works? What is the difference between a wage and grace?
4. Why does Paul use David as an example of salvation by faith? What had David “earned” as a wage and what did he receive instead?
5. Read Romans 4:9-12. Was Abraham declared righteous because of his circumcision or because of his faith? How does Paul make this argument? How does this make Abraham the father of all who believe and actually father of believing Gentiles before he became the father of the Jews?
6. Read Romans 4:13-16. What is true of salvation by faith if people can make themselves right by keeping the law? Is it possible to mix in a little law (works) to faith and have it still be faith? Why or why not? Compare Galatians 5:1-6.

7. Read Romans 4:17-22. Do we believe because the Gospel Story all makes sense based on human reasoning or do we believe because we simply believe God tells the truth? How does the story of Abraham and Sarah illustrate this?
8. Read Romans 4:23-25. What is the message for us today?

Application

1. Is there anything we can add to what Jesus has already done to make ourselves more righteous in the presence of God? Why or why not?
2. If we continue to struggle with our shame and guilt is that a mark of humility or is that simply unbelief? Explain.
3. If the righteousness of God is credited to our account simply by faith and because of this no sin is credited to our account, how should we view ourselves? How does how we view ourselves affect how we live our lives on a daily basis?

