

CONCERNING THE WAY

September 7, 2010

LESSON 111: PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS



Chapter 4

In chapter 3 Paul firmly established that the righteousness of God is apart from the Law (3:21) and that people are justified by faith apart from works of the Law (3:28). But, as he has done before, he now heads off a potential rebuttal by the Jews. It was very difficult for a Jew to accept that being Jewish doesn't give them special privileges when it comes to justification by God. And it is also very difficult for many Jews and Christians to accept that good deeds have nothing to do with salvation.

You know, we all have a tendency to put people we consider "great" saints, pastors, or teachers on a pedestal, and consider them our heroes. And there's nothing wrong with that, as long as we don't think they were perfect or on a different spiritual plane as we are. If they inspire us to follow God more closely, that is a very good thing. Most of us can think of people, usually older than us, that inspired us with the good works they have done and the lives that they have led.

In this chapter Paul is going to talk about Abraham, a great hero and father of the Jews. They loved to boast that Abraham was their father. They kept meticulous records to prove they were his descendants. The question is, was Abraham saved by his acts of good works and obedience to God, or was he saved by the faith that Paul spoke about in the last chapter?

Romans 4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh, has discovered regarding this matter?

This verse reminds us that, even though this book is for all of us, Paul was speaking to Jews here (our ancestor according to the flesh). He adds the "according to the flesh" so that we understand he's not speaking of a spiritual lineage, which he will speak of later. Why is he bringing up Abraham? Because Abraham, considered the father of all Jews, lived before the Law was given.

Romans 4:2 or if Abraham was declared righteous by the works of the law, he has something to boast about – but not before God.

Paul is speaking to Jews that claimed to obey the Law. He saying, "No, you don't. You say you do, but you really don't." If anyone could be justified by works, by obeying the Law, it would be Abraham, right? The Rabbis taught that Abraham had built up so much merit from his good works that it was also applied to his descendants. If he had been declared righteous by God because he kept the Law, then he would have something to boast about.

Many people believe that Paul and the Lord's brother James contradicted each other. Paul says Abraham was not justified by works, and James said he was (James 2:21). How do we resolve this? Both men were writing inspired by the Holy Spirit, right? One of them couldn't be wrong. Well, one way to look at it is to read the whole body of each man's writings. Paul made it clear in many of his epistles that we are justified by faith alone, not by works. I believe that, in reading the book of James, that our faith, if it is real, ought to produce good works. Henry Morris says this:

“The point is that Abraham was justified by faith in God’s Word, but he then was asked to demonstrate that his faith was genuine by his works. He was justified before God by faith but was justified before men by his works (see James 2:21-24).”

Let’s look at this passage in James:

James 2:21-23 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? (22) You see that his faith was working together with his works and his faith was perfected by works. (23) And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Now Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend.

James agrees with Paul that Abraham, long before he offered Isaac on the altar, was declared righteous by God because of his faith. But he says that this scripture was fulfilled. That means that Abraham “proved” God right in declaring Him righteous. **He became in experience what God had much earlier declared him to be.**

We also are saved by faith, but are asked to demonstrate that our faith is genuine by doing good works. Hopefully we will never be put to the test like Abraham was, but we will be tested – that you can be sure of.

Romans 4:3 For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

This is a good lesson for us right here. Whenever you have or are asked an ethical, moral, or theological question, you should always ask first, “What does the Bible say?” Paul says, let’s go to the Bible and see what it says. He is quoting Genesis 15:6 here. God declared Abraham righteous not on his behavior, or his works, but on the fact that he believed and trusted in God. Abraham himself was NOT righteous. He was a sinner, and the Bible doesn’t hold back in describing Abraham’s sins. He never completely obeyed and trusted God perfectly.

Paul uses an accounting term here (“credited to him”), to make sure we understand what he is saying. Because Abraham believed what God had said to him about his children, righteousness was put into (credited to) his bank account. It had nothing to do with his works.

It’s important to understand that justification never means making a person righteous. This is misunderstood by many Christians. It only means that God treats a person as if they were righteous. This is how salvation by faith in Jesus Christ works.

When we believe in what God has said about His son, what Jesus Christ has done for us, His righteousness is credited to us. **God treats us from then on as if we were righteous**, because of Jesus.

Then we are to live righteously, not in ourselves, but in the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. We will never attain Christ’s righteousness in our walk in this life, but we rest in the work that has been done for our justification and the work that He is currently doing in us right now to transform us into His likeness. **We grow into what God has declared we are.** It doesn’t happen immediately. The Holy Spirit gradually sanctifies us throughout our lives.

“To discover that the greatest saints have no other standing than the weakest saints, is a lesson that is

difficult for all of us! So now for the Jew to find that great Abraham has nothing in the flesh, but must be justified by simple faith, like any sinner, is a great shock. There was no honor, no “merit,” in Abraham’s believing the faithful God, who cannot lie. The honor was God’s. When Abraham believed God, he did the one thing that a man can do without doing anything! God made the statement, the promise; and God undertook to fulfill it. Abraham believed in his heart that God told the truth. There was no effort here. Abraham’s faith was not an act, but an attitude. His heart was turned completely away from himself to God and His promise. This left God free to fulfill that promise. Faith was neither a meritorious act by Abraham, nor a change of character or nature, in Abraham: he simply believed God would accomplish what He had promised.” William Newell

Romans 4:4-5 Now to the one who works, his pay is not credited due to grace but due to obligation. (5) But to the one who does not work, but believes in the one who declares the ungodly righteous, his faith is credited as righteousness.

These are two verses every believer should know by heart. It is the tendency of every person to believe that we can be saved by being good. Did you really read verse 5? God declares the ungodly righteous. Isn’t that a shocking statement? He doesn’t declare the godly or the good to be righteous, but the ungodly. And we are all ungodly, as much as we don’t want to think of ourselves that way.

“It cannot be too much emphasized that the words, “the ungodly,” in verse 5, wholly shut out any other class from justification. If we say, God, indeed, has in some special cases justified notoriously, openly, evidently ungodly ones; while His general habit is, to justify the godly (which is what human reason demands), then we at once deny all Scripture. For God says, “There is no distinction; for all sinned; there is none righteous,—not one.” And if you claim that God justifies the godly, we ask, on what ground? If you say on the ground of their godliness, you have left out the blood of Christ,—on which ground alone God can deal with sinners; and you have really denied this so-called “godly” man to be a sinner before God at all, since he is to be justified on another ground than is the openly ungodly sinner,—the shed blood of Christ.” Newell

When we receive a paycheck at our work, that is not something they give us because they are nice and want to give us something. No, we have earned that paycheck. They owe it to us. If this was the way salvation worked, then we could say that if we behaved in a certain way, or did certain things, then God would owe us salvation. This is what the Jews were doing, and some people, even in the church, still think that way today. Do you see how that denigrates God and brings Him down? It is an abomination before Him. God doesn’t owe us anything! Trying to add works in any way to our salvation is like spitting in God’s face and stomping on His grace!

But if, instead of working for our salvation, we believe God (like Abraham), then because of that faith He declares us and recognizes us as righteous.

This doesn’t mean that good works aren’t important. Works have nothing to do with salvation, but good works should follow salvation. If you have become a true believer, then He will place in you a desire to serve Him. We should always be looking for opportunities to be used of God. We should also pray for God to use us every day, and He will. And I’m not just talking about serving in a ministry at church. There are many things you can do to serve God, every day. It may be as simple as a kind word to someone you meet, or listening to a friend who is troubled.

Service to God is often connected to how He has gifted us. He gives us spiritual gifts so that we can serve others. Try to determine what God has gifted you for, and use those gifts and your natural talents to serve Him.

"We are all ungodly! And when we place our faith in the God who is in the business of declaring righteous the ungodly—who trust Him as they are,—on the sole ground of the shed blood of Christ,—then we are justified,—accounted righteous, by God. No, it is not the regenerate, the born again man, who is declared righteous,—it is the ungodly. It is not the penitent man or the praying man, as such, but the ungodly. It is not the professing Christian who has "escaped the defilements of the world" (II Peter 2) through certain spiritual experiences (it may be of a high order), but the ungodly, who believes, as such, on the God who declares righteous the ungodly who believe on Him—AS SUCH! And of course it is not the "church-member,"—Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, or Plymouth Brother, as such,—but, the ungodly. This is not, either, putting a premium on ungodliness, but telling the truth! If you have not relied on God as an ungodly one, you have yet to be declared righteous; for He is the God who declares righteous the ungodly who believe on Him." Newell

Romans 4:6-8 So even David himself speaks regarding the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: (7) *"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; (8) blessed is the one against whom the Lord will never count sin."*

Now Paul gives us the testimony of another Old Testament hero, King David, quoting from Psalm 32:1-2. This satisfies the Jewish requirement of having two witnesses to settle a matter (Deuteronomy 19:15, referred to by Jesus in Matthew 18:16 and by Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:1 and 1 Timothy 5:19).

David is agreeing with what was said about Abraham, and it proves that justification worked the same way for those even under the Mosaic Law.

"Lawless deeds are forgiven" – forgiveness is more than just removing the penalty for sin. Even an earthly judge might let you off if someone else pays the penalty for you. But forgiveness involves the heart. It is God treating you as the prodigal son, holding his arms out to you and embracing you with tenderness and mercy!

"Whose sins are covered" – "Covered" is an Old Testament word. Sacrifices could never take away sins, but only "cover" them from sight. They weren't taken away until Christ's death on the cross.

"Will never count sin" – He will never bring them up to us again. They are removed, as if they never happened. As a believer, if we sin, then like David we may be chastened or disciplined if we do not recognize it and confess it, but that sin is not held against us ever again.

Now notice what Paul is saying. David said that it is great when God does not put your sin to your bank account. Because of Christ, He does not hold sin against us. Our sins were put upon Jesus Christ at the cross. Paul has told us that, not only is sin not put to our account; God's righteousness IS put to our account. Wow! No wonder David says blessed is the person to whom God credits righteousness!

Romans 4:9-10 *Is this blessedness then for the circumcision or also for the uncircumcision? For we say, "faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." (10) How then was it credited to him? Was he circumcised at the time, or not? No, he was not circumcised but uncircumcised!*

Paul continues to head off potential objections. A Jew might argue, "Yes, but both Abraham and David were circumcised." Since circumcision is a sign of the covenant between God and His chosen people (Genesis 17:9-14), isn't circumcision the basis for justification? NO! As Paul says in verse 10,

Abraham was declared righteous before he was circumcised. And it was a long time before that. Abraham was declared righteous by God in Genesis 15:6, but he wasn't circumcised until Ishmael was thirteen years old, so that means he was declared righteous about 14 years before he was circumcised. So, circumcision had nothing to do with Abraham's justification. Paul also asks, "is this justification by faith also for the Gentiles?" Since circumcision isn't what makes you justified, it is for all people. Paul confirms this in the next two verses:

Romans 4:11-12 And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised, so that he would become the father of all those who believe but have never been circumcised, that they too could have righteousness credited to them. (12) And he is also the father of the circumcised, who are not only circumcised, but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham possessed when he was still uncircumcised.

Paul has made it clear that human works do not bring us righteousness. Now he's going to also set aside divine ordinances in the same way! This doesn't mean circumcision wasn't important. It was the physical sign to Abraham's descendants of the righteousness that he received by faith. It's similar to what baptism means to a Christian. It has nothing to do with our salvation, and doesn't make us righteous, but is an outward sign that we belong to Jesus, and have received His righteousness by faith in Him.

Paul is saying that the big issue is not whether you're circumcised or not. Circumcision was meant to be a mark or sign of the righteousness you received by faith, but the Jews had turned that around and thought that, because they were circumcised, they were righteous. Paul says that Abraham became the spiritual father of all those who believe God, like he did, and receive this gift of righteousness credited to their bank account.

Paul is bulldozing into the garbage dump everything that both Jews and pagan Gentiles believed in those days, that you had to DO something to gain favor with God. He's clearing the ground; it is totally something new, and against all human wisdom or reasoning. This is a gigantic truth!

Do you see why there was so much opposition against him? And this is still hard for many people to get today. Opposition is growing against true Christians. In our sinful natures we think there is something we must do to please God. But, you see, if we could please God by any works we do, then that immediately opens us up to feelings of pride over our perceived ability to obey the law and do good works, and feelings of superiority over others who we think are not measuring up like we are. **This is why God gives us His righteousness, so that no one can boast in what he has done.** Only God can get the glory, and that's how it should be.

We should do good works out of love for the Lord. But we have to always be aware of how weak we are without Christ, and how easy it is to have wrong motives even when we do something good. It is selfless acts for Christ that will be rewarded in heaven.

Romans 4:13 For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would inherit the world was not fulfilled through the law, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.

The promise includes Genesis 12:2-3, 7, 13, 13:15-17, 18:18, 22:18. These promises were given 600 years before the law was given through Moses. So the law has nothing to do with these promises, they will not be fulfilled by keeping the Law. They will be fulfilled, number one, because God keeps

His promises. And God will keep those promises because Abraham believed God, and God declared him righteous, and now God could bless him. It all points back to God.

What are these promises? What does “inherit the world” mean? It’s about the Kingdom! Jesus Christ, a descendant of Abraham, will inherit the world when he sits on David’s throne in Jerusalem during the Millennium and rules the world with a rod of iron. Other physical descendants of Abraham who have believed God like Abraham will share in that inheritance. And, we Gentiles who have believed God about Jesus Christ, Abraham’s spiritual descendants, will also share in that inheritance.

Romans 4:14-15 For if they become heirs by the law, faith is empty and the promise is nullified. (15) For the law brings wrath, because where there is no law there is no transgression either.

It is very simple. If we can gain salvation, if we can please God by obeying the Law, then faith is worthless. It would be meaningless. The law brings wrath. We can’t keep it. By the way, what is the whole point of the Law? What did Jesus say? To love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul. Did you do that today? Did you really?

This is a good reason why it is so foolish to believe that God won’t keep His promises to Israel, or that the promises have somehow been changed to be for the Church, because of Israel’s rebellion. It’s not about Israel’s performance, or our performance, but about God’s righteousness! He will keep His promises to Israel because He credited righteousness to Abraham. And in the same way, we can trust His promises to us – not because of our ability to keep from sinning, but because He has declared us righteous once and for all. This is an incredible truth.

There are four points to be made from verse 15:

1. You have to have a law to be able to transgress (break) it.
2. This leads us to believe there may be ages in time (dispensations) where law is not the principle of relationship with God. This, in fact, is the age we live in.
3. To come into a spiritual place where there is no transgression, humans must be removed completely from under the principle of law. Paul will talk more about this in chapters 6 and 7.
4. The only place of freedom from law is the place of inheritance (of righteousness from God by His grace).

Romans 4:16 For this reason it is by faith so that it may be by grace, with the result that the promise may be certain to all the descendants — not only to those who are under the law, but also to those who have the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all

This is another amazing verse. Don’t miss this. God, in His great loving kindness, wants us to be certain of our salvation. If we had to depend on our works to save us, we would never know for sure whether we were saved or not. But because it is totally by grace through faith, we can be totally assured. We can rest in what Christ has done. It is finished.

All I can say is Hallelujah! It is not Law – Works – Promise. It is Faith – Grace – Promise. And, if we have faith like Abraham, even we Gentiles get to share in the promises. We also are descendants of Abraham, because of our faith.

Paul is insistent that only those who have the faith of Abraham are the seeds of Abraham, whether

they are Jew or Gentile. Abraham is the father of ALL of us who have placed our faith in the salvation provided by God.

Romans 4:17 (as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"). He is our father in the presence of God whom he believed – the God who makes the dead alive and summons the things that do not yet exist as though they already do.

Paul quotes Genesis 17:5 here. This promise has been literally fulfilled, as well as spiritually. Abraham is the ancestor not only of the Israelites, but also of all the Arabic nations, as well as the Edomites, Midianites and others that are now either extinct or mixed with others. Probably most of the Middle Eastern Islamic nations have at least some genetic descent from Abraham. Then, of course, all of us who have accepted Christ are Abraham's spiritual descendants.

You know, we could actually say that we have four fathers. We have an earthly physical father. We have Abraham, the spiritual father of all believers. Most, if not all, have a spiritual father in the person who led us to Christ, whether that person was a family member, a friend, a pastor, or Sunday School teacher. And then of course we have our ultimate Father, who we were born to by the Holy Spirit through His Word.

"Things that do not yet exist as though they already do" – in the Greek it is literally "calling things not being, being!" This is how He created the universe back in Genesis 1, from nothing! This is an important concept when it comes to our being declared righteous by God. God is committed to bring to actual reality all that He declares or reckons. In other words, He declares us righteous, but someday we will BE righteous in experience as He has declared us now. It's as if it is already done, even though in our practical experience we are not there yet.

"For God to call the things not being as being; to extend to a man the complete value of Christ's atoning work and "reckon" him justified and glorified in His sight, although not yet so in manifestation, is God's own business. Let us praise Him for His grace!" Newell

When God says something is, or something is going to happen, then it is as if it already has happened, that's how sure it is. We can count on God's "I will's" the same as we count on His "I have's." What for us is yet to happen is for God something that has already happened. It is a fact. So **can you believe what God has said, even if what he has said does not currently exist, and there is no evidence that it will ever exist?** That's what Abraham did, and Paul goes on to briefly tell the story:

Romans 4:18 Against hope Abraham believed in hope with the result that he became the father of many nations according to the pronouncement, "so will your descendants be."

There was no human reason for Abraham to believe that he would have descendants that numbered more than the stars in the sky. There was no reason for him or Sarah to hope that they would ever have children. Abraham believed on God based on what He said He would do! We believe Him because of what He has already done in Jesus Christ.

Romans 4:19-20 Without being weak in faith, he considered his own body as dead (because he was about one hundred years old) and the deadness of Sarah's womb. (20) He did not waver in unbelief about the promise of God but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God.

God gave the promises years before he began to fulfill them by causing Sarah to become pregnant with Isaac, when she was 90 and Abraham was about 100. He waited until there was no hope, biologically and physically speaking, of having children.

Abraham knew there was nothing humanly that could be done to enable him or Sarah to have children. But he believed that God could bring it about. And Paul says he did not waver in his belief. "Waver" (diekrithē) means "to be divided" (sometimes translated "doubt," as in James 1:6). This doesn't mean he was perfect. He did not trust God fully, because he took matters into his own hands more than once. Instead of trusting and waiting on God, he gave in to Sarah and took Hagar as his mistress. He sinned in this way, and in other ways, including two times he claimed that Sarah was his sister, because he was afraid for his life.

Romans 4:21-22 He was fully convinced that what God promised he was also able to do. (22) So indeed it was credited to Abraham as righteousness.

Even though Abraham didn't always make the right choices and did not always trust God completely, he always believed unwaveringly in God's promises. That was enough for God to declare him righteous. The essence of saving faith is taking God at His Word, no matter how difficult it may seem. Paul keeps repeating this statement about Abraham, to make sure we get it. He is our example when it comes to God's promises for us.

Romans 4:23-25 But the statement it was credited to him was not written only for Abraham's sake, (24) but also for our sake, to whom it will be credited, those who believe in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. (25) He was given over because of our transgressions and was raised for the sake of our justification.

This is what this great story in the Old Testament means to us. As God credited Abraham with righteousness because he believed God, if we believe in what God has said about Jesus Christ, so He will credit His righteousness to our bank account.

"those who believe in the one who raised Jesus" – what is the object of our belief? Like Abraham, we believe in God. Jesus said in John 12:44:

John 12:44 But Jesus shouted out, "The one who believes in me does not believe in me, but in the one who sent me,

Why was Jesus crucified? Because of our sin, our lostness from God. Why was He resurrected? Because then God could save us on account of Jesus taking the wrath of God against us on Himself. Both the crucifixion and the resurrection are instrumental in our justification. Our sins are done away with at the cross, and so we now will also be resurrected into eternal life. The resurrection is where we find our new life. We are new creatures in Christ Jesus. He was crucified because of our sins, and we're justified in a risen Christ. If there had been no resurrection, His death would have done nothing for us.

Now justification involves not only, negatively, the putting away of our guilt; but, positively, a new place and standing. Our old standing, in the first Adam, was utterly condemned at the cross. Our new standing, our life, and our righteousness, is in Jesus Christ, and we don't need any standing of our own ever again.

Do you see why it is so important to know and understand the book of Romans? This is Christianity 101, folks. It is not always easy to grasp, it is deep theology, but that's why we're taking it slow. Many churches refuse to teach Romans like this, because they think it is boring to their congregations and people won't get it. It's not a coincidence that pastors of those churches often times teach things that are false about salvation, sometimes adding or taking away from what Paul is saying here.

Well, if you don't understand these concepts that Paul has presented in these first four chapters, it will corrupt your understanding of Christianity. You won't understand what God has done for you, you won't understand what salvation is all about and you certainly won't be able to explain it to anyone else.

Can't leave you hanging at the end of chapter 4, we have to include Paul's point here.

Romans 5:1-2 *Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, (2) through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of God's glory.*

"Grace in which we stand" - Our confidence is not in ourselves or our ability to keep a set of commands, but in the grace of God – that is where we stand. This is how we live, by grace, not by our works.

"Hope" here, as usual in the New Testament, means anticipation of something that will happen in the future. It is not something we think might happen, but a sure expectation. We rejoice in that, it is where our joy should be found! You could say we have one foot on earth in God's grace, and the other in heaven, also in His grace. We'll discuss these verses more next lesson.

In chapter 4, Paul presented several irrefutable reasons why justification is by faith: (1) Since justification is a gift, it cannot be earned by works (vv. 1-8). (2) Since Abraham was justified before he was circumcised, circumcision has no relationship to justification (vv. 9-12). (3) Since Abraham was justified centuries before the Law, justification is not based on the Law (vv. 13-17). (4) Abraham was justified because of his faith in God, not because of his works (vv. 18-25).

JUSTIFICATION—A REVIEW

I. *What It Is Not*

1. It is not regeneration, the impartation of life in Christ; for although it is "justification of life"—meaning God will give life to the justified, he is justified as ungodly.
2. It is not "a new heart," or "change of heart,"—indefinite expressions at best, but having in them no proper definition of justification.
3. It is not "making an unjust man just," in his life and behavior. The English word justified, as we all know, comes from the Latin word meaning to make just or righteous; but this is exactly what justification is not, in Scripture.
4. It is not to be confused with sanctification; which is the state of those placed in Christ,—“sanctified in Christ Jesus”; and consequently the manner of their walk in the Spirit.

II What It Is

1. It is a declaration by God in heaven concerning a person, that he stands righteous in God's sight.
2. God justifies a person, on the basis or ground of the "redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (3:24). See 5:6: We are "justified by [or in] His blood";—the blood the procuring ground, or means; God the acting Person.
3. God who has already acted judicially, in pronouncing the whole world guilty (Romans 3:19), now again acts judicially concerning that sinner who becomes convinced of his guilt and helplessness, and believes that God's Word concerning Christ's expiatory sacrifice applies to himself; and thus becomes "of faith in Jesus" (3:26,RSV, margin): God's judicial pronouncement now is, that such a believing one stands righteous in His sight.
4. Justification, or declaring-righteous, therefore, is the reckoning by God to a believing sinner of the whole value of the infinite work of Christ on the cross; and, further, His connecting this believing sinner with the Risen Christ in glory, giving him the same acceptance before Himself as has Christ: so that the believer is now "the righteousness of God in Him" (Christ). Negatively, then, God in justifying a sinner reckons to him the putting away of sin by Christ's blood. Positively, He places him in Christ: he is *one with Christ forever before God!*

(from William Newell's Commentary on Romans)