

Romans Study
Session 5 - Romans 3:31-4:25

If you recall last week, Paul wrapped up his arguments in chapter 3 concerning the bad news of universal condemnation and introduced the good news of justification by faith. In chapter 4 this week, Abraham is used as an extended illustration of the truth of justification by faith and how it plays out in the world.

At first when one reads chapter 4, it is strange. The Roman church is largely Gentile Christians and yet Paul is spending an awful lot of time discussing topics that seem mostly for the Jewish believers in the church. Yet, it's important to note that the Gentile Christians uses the Old Testament for their Scriptures and many of the truths in this chapter apply to everyone, despite their ethnic background. In fact, while this chapter is largely ignored by many, it contains some of the most powerful arguments for Paul's gospel, which is justification by faith alone. We can break the chapter into three sections: 1) There is an Old Testament witness to justification by faith and that is Abraham, 2) God's people are determined not by their biological descent but rather from their spiritual descent from Abraham, & 3) The promise of God was came as the result of faith not works of the law.

Abraham is used as an example here for two reasons: 1) he is revered by the Jews and both an ancestor and the model of faithfulness before God & 2) he is the key figure in God's plan for salvation as revealed in the Old Testament. (In Abraham all the nations of the world will be blessed.)

Chapter 3 ended on the subject of boasting.

Q: Does anyone remember what Paul had to say about boasting? (*no one could rightly boast before the Lord of any right standing they had before Him*)

[Romans 3:31]

Q: Based on what we examined last week, why would Paul say that we establish the law even though we are justified through faith? (*The law is essential in bringing people to salvation. It had to come first in God's plan of salvation to show man that he couldn't earn righteousness on his own works. Instead, he needed to see the law as the guide that led to despair and thus to Christ. To get rid of the law, gets rid of the holy requirements of God and the conviction of sin that leads a person to Christ.*)

I. There is an Old Testament witness to God's plan of justification by faith

[Romans 4:1-8]

Q: Why could Abraham not boast in his righteous standing before God? (*Because he received that standing by faith, not by any work which he had done.*)

[Genesis 15:4-6]

Q: When you work at your job, are your wages a gift from your employer or are they considered what is due you for your work? (*they are what is due you*)

The word “credited” or “reckoned” is the Greek rendering of a Hebrew word that is an accounting term. It means to account to a person a something that does not inherently belong to that person. In this context, it speaks of God crediting Abraham a righteous standing before Him that Abraham didn’t possess on his own. God granted him the status of righteous and he was considered righteous before the Lord despite not having done anything to earn that right standing. This is one of the single most important concepts in the Christian faith. God gives us something we don’t deserve and cannot earn or pay off.

Q: According to v.5, who does God justify? (*the wicked, ungodly*)

Q: Why does God justify the wicked instead of the good? (*There are no good people. All are sinners in need of God’s forgiveness.*)

So here is the take away from this verse. The so-called good person who works for a living, pays their taxes, takes care of their family and neighbors, is generous to the needy and acts in a kind way to all those around them - that person is not justified by their so-called righteous deeds (deeds judged by the person and society). On the other hand the greatest sinner in the world, let’s use Hitler, if he were to believe the message of the gospel fully, that person would be declared righteous before God. As a result, he would be able to approach God in prayer with confidence in his right standing as well as enter heaven after the physical life ends while the so-called righteous person would not share these benefits.

In vv.6-8 Paul gives Scriptural evidence for the support of this view concerning justification by faith.

[Psalm 32:1-2]

This is a psalm of David. David is one who was credited righteous before God due to his faith. The word “blessed” pertains to those who have received something from God NOT those who have earned anything from God. The blessing is that the righteous person has had their sins covered. It is assumed that these people will continue to sin occasionally, yet God will not hold their sins against them. That’s the meaning of the present tense used in v.2 - “*the Lord does not impute iniquity*” To sum up what Paul is saying to this point is that God declares people righteous who are not really righteous due to their faith in God. As a result, God accepts all sinners just the way they are with no need to “prepare” themselves for receiving God’s justification. Also, Christians, thus do not base their relationship with God on their behavior but rather on faith in God and His actions. If David, in the Old Testament spoke of justification through faith, then everyone should see this as God’s method of imparting righteousness to mankind. It’s not a “Johnny-come-lately” theology as many ancient Jews were insisting.

Q: How does sin impact our right standing before the Lord? (*It doesn’t. We cannot undo the work of God or nullify the gift of God. All our sins have already been accounted for by God and*

paid for by Christ's death on the cross.)

Q: What keeps the Christian from living a life of pure sin? *(The righteousness granted to us changes us so that our natural default is no longer sin but righteousness. It's not natural for Christians to sin.)*

A note about sin in the life of a believer. The Lord is the one who works in the life of other believers to bring them to a full repentance from any particular sin. We may want to push a believer to forsake a sin that we feel is particularly heinous in our sight but we are not God and should not engage in an activity reserved for the Holy Spirit. He alone brings conviction and does so in His timing. While we may be used of God to educate, inform, warn and even rebuke from time to time a brother or sister who is engaging in a blatant, visible sin, it is not our place to judge that other believer nor is it our place to set the timing for their repentance. If a person knows that a behavior is sin, then we can trust that the Holy Spirit will lead that person, in His timing, to repentance. Any words or actions we take that aren't Spirit-led will probably only cause rebellion against what God is truly trying to accomplish in the person's life. Our trust in God is that He is working in the life of the other believer just as He is working in our life to bring us to repentance from our sins.

II. God's people are determined not by their biological descent but rather from their spiritual descent from Abraham

[Romans 4:9-12]

The blessing mentioned on v.9 goes back to vv. 7-8 and deals with the blessing David pronounced on those who sins the Lord did not count against them.

Q: Was this right standing credited to Abraham when he was uncircumcised or while circumcised? *(v.10 - uncircumcised)*

As a historical fact, Abraham received the pronouncement of his righteousness 29 years before he was circumcised. The fact that Abraham, by his faith, would become the father of many nations is the focus here. Those nations are those of Jews and Gentiles and are of faith, not biological lineage.

Q: Who could become righteous under faith? *(All people)*

Q: According to v.12 - can those who are circumcised be considered faithful by their circumcision alone? *(No, they must also exhibit the faith as Abraham did. Again, it is the faith of a Jew, not any external action or work that justifies.)*

In our modern world, we don't really grasp the full significance of the importance of circumcision. Circumcision was expressly necessary for a male to be considered a Jew. In human reckoning, without this rite having been performed on a man, he was always an outsider to the Jewish faith, no matter how pious his deeds or sincere his faith. This kept many, many

Gentiles out of the Jewish faith. They may have believed in the One True God of the Old Testament and lived a good life according to the Scriptures but without being circumcised, they were not considered a Jew. They were not considered full-converts until circumcised and most men just would not go through this rite to seal the deal. This is why this is such a revolutionary statement by Paul and has such far reaching applications for us today. Now, whether a person was circumcised or not made no difference at all. The door to righteousness was open to all who had faith in God, like Abraham's faith.

[Galatians 3:26-29]

We might be tempted to think that God allowing the Gentiles into the family of faith in God is the main point but it's just a portion of the main point. What Paul is truly teaching is that God has removed all outward distinctions between mankind through His grace found in Jesus Christ. There are no externals that bring a person to a right standing before God and there are no external standards that give anyone a better footing to gain a right standing before God.

III. The promise of God was came as the result of faith not works of the law.

[Romans 4:13-15]

In this section the word "promise" shows up for the first time in the book of Romans. There are three points about this promise that are going to be seen throughout the rest of this chapter. 1) The promise is based upon faith not law, 2) Because the promise is based upon faith, it unites Jews and Gentiles into one people, & 3) The faith Abraham showed in the face of God's promises was firm and unwavering.

[Genesis 12:1-3]

The promise of God to Abraham came through the righteousness of faith, not the Law. The Law was not given to Moses for another 430 years after this promise was given.

Q: If those who kept the Law were the true heirs of God's promises to Abraham, what would be made void or useless? (*v.14 - faith*)

In other words, this goes back to our discussion last week about the parable of Jesus in Mark 2:22 about the new wine going into old wineskins in that Law and grace cannot co-exist. A soul can only cling to one at a time. Whichever one that one clings to renders the other useless in his or her life. If one clings to the Law, then there is no true righteousness for that person.

Q: What does the law bring? (*v.15 - wrath*)

Q: What does Paul mean in v.15 when he says, "*but where there is no law, neither is there violation.*" (*The word "violation" means to be disobedient to a law or commandment that a person has been directly been made responsible for keeping or obeying. Thus, there can be no transgression or disobedience where there the law has been removed. There can be no violation*)

of a non-existent law.)

[Romans 4:16-17]

Q: How confident can a person who has received a right standing from God be in that standing? *(v.16 - certain)*

Q: What is the source of that certainty? *(v.16 - the grace of God which worked in the life of the person. We are certain because it is God's work, not man's work.)*

The word “descendants” in v.16 is actually the word “seed” in the Greek. Here it means offspring or descendants. While usually when used this way it means physical descendants, here it means spiritual descendants. The promise of Abraham is valid for all believers - no matter how they got to Christ is not important but rather that they showed faith in Him. Jews and Gentiles alike are now included in the promise of Abraham.

Q: What are two of the powers of God mentioned in v.17? *(He is able to give life to the dead and He can call into being things that do not exist)*

These are describing the God Abraham believed in. This is the foundation for why Abraham could put his faith in God. He knew that God could do these two things.

[Romans 4:18-22]

These verses give us the character of Abraham's faith. Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah his wife was 90 years old when Isaac was born. Abraham did not ignore the “facts” of biology when considering the promises of God. He faced those hard facts and yet chose to exercise faith in the God who could call into being things that do not exist - such as a son from a barren womb.

Q: What are some of the characteristics of Abraham's faith as shown in vv. 18-22? *(not weak, unwavering, grew stronger, glorified God, being fully assured, etc.)*

It was by showing this sort of faith that Abraham was credited righteous. The question is what happens if we doubt or fail at some point? Does our faith need to be perfect?

[Genesis 17:15-19]

Q: In v. 17, what did Abraham do in response to God's news of a child being born to Sarah and himself? *(he laughed. This was a sign of disbelief. Abraham had momentary doubts yet those doubts never overcame his underlying faith in God. He continued to take God at His word even though he suffered doubts from time to time.)*

Q: Based upon this, do you think that God expects perfect performance from us in our lives of faith? *(no, He didn't expect it from Abraham and his faith was credited to him as righteousness.)*

[Hebrews 11:11-12, 17-19]

We need to make three points concerning this faith and what it's like.

- 1) It's distinct from the Law (we've mentioned this a lot)
- 2) It has no power in and of itself. The object of faith is where the power is located.
- 3) Faith is founded upon God's Word - not the evidence of our senses or worldly reason.

[Romans 4:23-25]

Q: Was the phrase "and it was credited to him as righteousness" written just for Abraham? (v.23 - *No, it was all who had the faith like Abraham*)

This is an early church confession or possibly the words of an early hymn of the faith. It's very awkward in English because of the typical translation of the word "for" in the first part of each line in v.25. (The NASB gets the first one right but botches the second one.) A more smooth and accurate translation into modern English would be "*He was delivered up because of our transgressions and was raised in order to accomplish our justification.*" The key is that the death and resurrection of Jesus are what make our justification possible. It is faith in these two historical events that make up the gospel message.

This is the first mention of Christ in this chapter. If you were to take out vv. 23-25, one might say (if they didn't read the rest of the book) that one could have faith in any random god and be justified. However, that is wrong belief. One must believe in Christ, the One who died on the cross for our sins and then rose from the dead to make justification possible. Abraham didn't believe in a random God. His belief was in Christ, though he didn't know Jesus' name. He understood God was going to bless all nations through him and that those promises were going to come true in the Messiah/Savior that the Lord would bring in His time.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?