

## Romans | The Gift of Righteousness (part 3 of 5)

### Belief Creates Righteousness

Romans 4:1-12

Mark Vroegop

---

*“What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.” (Romans 4:1–12, ESV)*

The Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century changed the course of Christianity forever. Led by Martin Luther, the reformers were grieved by the theological drift of the Catholic Church and the abuses that flowed from a works-based view of salvation. The Reformers wanted to guide Christianity back to essence of a biblical view of salvation. Eventually the core truths of the Reformation were summarized with five Latin phrases – the Five *Solas*.

- **Sola Scriptura** (“Scripture Alone”) – The Bible is our ultimate authority
- **Sola Fide** (“Faith Alone”) – We are saved by faith
- **Sola Gratia** (“Grace Alone”) – Salvation comes to us by grace
- **Solus Christus** (“Christ Alone”) – Jesus is our only Savior, Lord, and King
- **Soli Deo Gloria** (“to the glory of God alone”) – Our aim is to live exclusively for God’s glory

These core historical beliefs radically altered the landscape of Christianity, and they gave birth to Protestant Christianity. However, the Five *Solas* were not new ideas. They were reflective of the essence of the gospel message as communicated in the Bible. The Reformation did not “discover” these truths; the Reformation reclaimed them.

It is important to keep this in mind because our tendency as human beings is to continually revert to a works-based understanding of salvation. Sometimes that happens on a grand scale where an entire religious system is built on the premise that we must work our way into righteousness. But it also happens on an individual level when we try to do things that are “good enough” to earn God’s approval or when we compare ourselves to others, believing that we are better than most people. Our natural human bias, because of sin, is toward achieving our salvation or working for God’s approval.

However, the gospel message of God’s righteousness being given to those who believe in Jesus changes everything. It is revolutionary at so many levels, and that is why the Apostle Paul spends so much time explaining justification by faith. Paul knows what history bears out to be true and what I hope you know personally: the gospel of faith alone through Christ alone has revolutionary power. It changes how you see yourself, God, others, your sin, your future, suffering, and even death itself. So this idea is worth exploring, not only because of its amazing impact, but also because we quickly drift toward a works-oriented mindset.

Romans chapter four is Paul’s most thorough explanation of the connection between belief (or faith) and righteousness. In verses 1-12 he reiterates his premise, links it to the past, and then identifies the ultimate purpose. All of this is to show us the power of the gospel of faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone.

### **The Premise: Faith, not works, creates righteousness**

4:1 begins with the words “What then . . .” and this is intended to link what was previously said in chapter three. Chapter four provides further clarity and depth on the central idea of Romans: that faith, not works, creates righteousness.

Previously, that premise sounded like this:

*“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” (Romans 3:23–24, ESV)*

*“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” (Romans 3:28, ESV)*

Paul continually sets up a contrast between a works-based understanding of righteousness and a faith-based understanding of righteousness. Now we have talked about this idea a lot already in our study, and I want to spend the bulk our time on how Paul seeks to prove this premise.

However, I want you see how this premise surfaces in chapter four. You can see it very clearly in verses 4-5:

*“Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,” (Romans 4:4–5, ESV)*

The argument is fairly straightforward, and Pastor Nate helped you last week in understanding the connection between a works-based salvation and boasting. Paul simply reiterates the premise

here that if you work for something, the wages that you earn are what you deserve. Works equal debt. Receiving your wages is, therefore, simply what you are owed.

If we were to apply this to salvation, then our works would result in God owing us something, and our works would be something in which we could boast. We would take credit for what we achieved, and God would end up being our servant, since He would now be in our debt – owing us what we have rightfully earned. The effect would be that the focal point would be on us rather than on Him, and salvation would be another expression of our belief in our supremacy over God.

The main premise is simply that one is justified by faith and not by works.

### **The Past: Abraham, David, and Circumcision**

Now to make that point very clear, Paul looks back into the history of the people of Israel, and he uses three poignant illustrations of grace-based, faith-activated righteousness.

#### **Abraham**

The first illustration is enormously important. Abraham was the father of the Jewish people, and he was revered as the model of godliness and righteousness. In fact, he was so highly regarded that many Jewish rabbis believed and taught that Abraham was justified by his obedience. One Jewish apocryphal book even stated, “Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life” (*The Book of Jubilees 23:10*). By using Abraham as a prime example here, Paul is correcting a widely held and incorrect view of righteousness while appealing to one of the most respected figures in Jewish history.

Paul introduces Abraham’s story into his argument in verses 1-2, identifying him as their forefather and using him to illustrate what he has previously said about boasting. The argument went like this: If Abraham was declared righteous by what he did, then he would have something about which he could boast, but we know that no one can boast before God based upon what Paul has previously said.<sup>1</sup>

*“What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.” (Romans 4:1–2, ESV)*

Paul intends to create a tension between what was believed about Abraham and what he is saying about righteousness. He wants the readers to ask, “How can this be? How do we reconcile Abraham’s righteousness and boasting?” Paul’s answer is brilliant.

He appeals back to the very foundation of Jewish history and the first promise that God made to Abraham and all the Jewish people. He aims to show how righteousness through faith is the way God has always worked, and so he appeals what is called the Abrahamic Covenant:

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Romans, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995). 122.

*"For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:3, ESV)*

Paul is quoting a special moment in biblical history. God had called Abraham, then known as Abram, from the land of Ur and had given him an amazing promise:

*"Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3, ESV)*

In chapter 15, God appears to Abram again and reiterates a summary of the covenant (v 1), and when Abram, who is childless, asks as to how God's blessing will be fulfilled since he has no child, God points him toward the night sky:

*"And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Genesis 15:5, ESV)*

So God had promised something to Abram; there is no visual evidence of it being fulfilled, and as God reaffirms the promise to him, Abram believes God. And Genesis 15:6 is the verse that Paul quotes in Romans 4:3.

*"And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." (Genesis 15:6, ESV)*

Abraham was counted righteous by God as he believed in God's promise as opposed to believing in himself. Abram and Sarah were already beyond the typical age of childbearing. So it was impossible for Abram to personally fulfill the promises of God. The only way for his descendants to be like the stars of the heavens would be for God to accomplish it. And that is what he believed. He believed in God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Now this raises the issue of how Old Testament saints were saved. I think that they were saved the same way that New Testament saints are saved: through believing in God's promises. In Abram, we see this in very elementary form in Genesis 15, and it takes even greater shape in Genesis 22, when he nearly offers his only son as a sacrifice. It seems to me that every season or dispensation of Biblical history required belief in the revealed promises of God.

In the New Testament we too are called to believe in the promise of God that *"to all who receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12) or "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).*

Old Testament saints believed in the promises of God, looking forward to the coming Messiah, and New Testament saints believe in the promises of God, looking back. It is belief, not works, which results in righteousness. To those who would desire to work for their salvation, Paul would point

you to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people and the model of obedience, to show you that even he was saved by faith not by works.<sup>2</sup> Belief is what God counts as righteousness.

This truth is summarized in verse 5. Although I explained it briefly in the last section, let's read it again to see the truth behind Abraham's experience in Genesis 15. Notice especially the words that follow the word "but."

*"And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness," (Romans 4:5, ESV)*

The essence of what Paul is saying here is that believing in the One who justifies means that a person's faith is counted as righteousness. Righteousness comes by faith, not works.

### **David**

The second signature example is David, whom the Bible describes as "after God's own heart" (1 Sam 13:14). But David had a colossal failure in the second half of his life. In 2 Samuel 11 we find the sordid tale of David's adultery with a woman named Bathsheba, her pregnancy, and David's murder of her husband to cover up his own sins. After David is confronted by the prophet Nathan and after he bore some significant consequences for his sin, he wrote Psalm 32, which reflects on God's mercy to him. God could have killed David for his failure.

In verse 6 Paul uses the words of David to demonstrate *"the blessing of the one to whom the Lord counts righteousness apart from works . . ."* What was proven by Abraham's belief in the previous verses is now proven by David's sinfulness. If David's righteousness depended on his faithfulness, he would be damned. David's only hope was the mercy of God.

*"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." (Romans 4:7-8, ESV)*

Notice the word "count" in verse 8. The word means to keep a record or to note a debit or credit on an account. But what makes the word really beautiful is the fact that it is also used in verse 5 where Paul says "his faith is counted as righteous." This is the beauty of the gospel – that God doesn't count our sin against us but instead counts people righteous through faith.

That is really important, not only for inviting you to come to Jesus for the first time, but also because it means that our failures and our sinful actions are not counted against us. This is so radical (even scandalous!) that some people might even accuse Christians of saying, "Just go ahead and sin because you are already forgiven." And Paul wrote Romans 6 to address that charge. God graciously counts people righteous and does not count their sin when they trust in Him.

---

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that James 2:21 seems to contradict Paul's statement in Romans 4. James says, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?" However, James and Paul, while sounding very similar, are addressing very different questions although they both use the word "justified." Paul is addressing those who might think that righteousness comes by works while James is addressing those who suggest that works, after conversion, are not important. While they both appeal to the same person and use the same language, Paul and James are not addressing the same issue. I think the tension is best solved by Augustine's often quoted statement: "Faith alone saves, but faith that saves is not alone."

Aren't you glad that God has dealt with us in this way? Aren't you so thankful that God has been kind to you despite what you deserved? Aren't you grateful that no matter where you've been or what you've done, you can still find forgiveness and cleansing? Aren't you glad that God in Christ has not counted your sin against you? "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven."

### **Circumcision**

The third illustration of Paul's argument that righteousness comes by faith is the spiritual symbol of circumcision, and he uses this issue to be sure that we are reminded that all this talk about Abraham, David, and Jewishness does not mean that the gospel is only applied to the Jewish people. In other words, God's aim in a "faith-alone" gospel is to redeem any sinner no matter what their nationality.

Now this issue is front and center in verse 9:

*"Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness." (Romans 4:9, ESV)*

Essentially, Paul will argue that a faith-based righteousness supersedes any other spiritual rite or observance (i.e., circumcision), and that broadens the application of the gospel.

To prove the supremacy of faith, Paul points to the order of spiritual activities in the life of Abraham in verses 10-11. After restating the premise "faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness" in verse 9, he explains the relationship between faith-as-righteousness and circumcision.

*"How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." (Romans 4:10-11a, ESV)*

Circumcision was the defining mark of identification and obedience for the Jewish people. We first hear of circumcision in Genesis 17, when God reiterates his covenant, changes Abram's name to Abraham, and affirms his promise of children although Abraham and Sarah are barren.

*"And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you." (Genesis 17:9-11, ESV)*

It would be hard to overestimate the spiritual, emotional, and national significance of circumcision in the hearts of the Jewish people. Perhaps it would be helpful to think what would go through your head if you saw your married friend no longer wearing a wedding ring. That comes close, except that in the case of circumcision, there were eternal issues on the line, since embracing circumcision meant that one had affirmed God's covenantal promises.

Paul has already used two heroes of the past, and now he uses the most cherished spiritual symbol to show the importance of faith. Paul simply argues that Abraham was counted righteous before he was circumcised; faith, not circumcision, is what counts for righteousness. In fact, circumcision is a *"seal of righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised"* (v 11a).

So what have we seen by Paul's excursion into the past? 1) Abraham was counted righteous by faith, 2) David was not counted guilty because of God's mercy, and 3) Circumcision is a symbol that was preceded by faith. These historical references are designed to make it very clear that the idea of a righteousness that comes by faith is not a New Testament anomaly. Righteousness has always been applied by faith not works.

### **The Purpose: To save Jews and Gentiles**

Why is Paul making this point so clear? Why is he using these historical illustrations? There are two reasons, and they relate to the reason he wrote Romans in the first place: First, Paul wants to clearly explain the gospel because it has the power to change everything – *"I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God . . ."* (Rom 1:16a).

Second, Paul has a missionary endeavor in mind – *"it is the power of God to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek . . ."* (Rom 1:16b). In verses 11-12 we have a glorious purpose statement as to why God is doing what he is doing:

*" . . . The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised."* (Romans 4:11–12, ESV)

Do not forget that one of the reasons that Paul rehearses the intricacies of the gospel is to motivate the believers in Rome to have a heart for the unreached people in Spain. Paul wants to give the Romans and us a big view of God's plan for redemption. He wants us to see the beauty of the gospel so that we will be motivated to share this glorious news anywhere and everywhere.

God's aim in counting people righteous by faith in Christ is to extend the glory of God over the whole world as people from every tribe, nation, and tongue put their faith in Christ. God's aim is to glorify Himself by rescuing helpless sinners who are powerless to save themselves and fully convinced that they do not need saving. God's aim is to save people by counting them righteous as they believe in Him not as they try to work for their salvation. And God's aim to have this redemption to be replicated wherever there are sinful human beings such that when they put their faith in Christ, they become part of God's people. They become the spiritual children of Abraham.

Reflecting on the beauty of righteousness through faith alone in Christ alone causes us to see the world around us differently. Two weeks ago our family came across this statement in Milton Vincent's *Gospel Primer*:

*The more I rehearse and exult in gospel truths, the more there develops within me a corresponding burden for non-Christians to enter into such blessings . . . Coming down from the heights of gospel meditation, Paul's heart is devastated by a burden for his fellow-Jews to experience the saving power of the gospel . . . Over time my joy in the gospel will become increasingly tinged with grief, and this grief-stained joy will lend a God-inspired passion to my ministry of evangelizing the lost.<sup>3</sup>*

On a personal level this means that Romans 4 is a clear invitation for anyone who has not yet turned to Christ to be saved today. Regardless of your past or your failures, the Good News is this: believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

For followers of Jesus, Romans 4 means that while we marvel at the beauty of God counting us righteous in Christ, we should then be moved to see people around us as desperately in need of being rescued – a grief-stained joy leads to a God-inspired passion for evangelism. Easter is only two weeks away; do not miss the opportunity to invite a friend to join you on Resurrection Sunday.

As Dale shared with you last week, we have now completed our three call-out meetings as we consider starting a new College Park campus in the Northeast, West, or Southern region of Indianapolis. We have been entrusted with the gospel, God has brought us together as a church, and we have to ask ourselves, “What is our role in reaching our city with message of the Gospel?”

Faith alone through Christ alone by grace alone changed the course of Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, but I do not think that was an unusual moment. The gospel has power! It is the power of God. And when it is received, cherished and proclaimed it can change the eternal destiny of individual people, change a neighborhood, a city, a nation, and eventually the entire world.

The gospel was and is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.

© **College Park Church**

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © **College Park Church** - Indianapolis, Indiana. [www.yourchurch.com](http://www.yourchurch.com)

---

<sup>3</sup> Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians – Learning to See the Glories of God's Love*, (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2008), 25-27