

***Justified by Faith (not Works)***  
*Romans 3:27-4:12*

Last week we saw from Romans 3:21-26 that people are justified by faith. To be justified means to be “declared righteous.” Those who accept by faith that Jesus paid for their sins on the cross, now have a right relationship with God. Today’s passage builds on last week’s passage and adds that *we are justified by faith **and not by works***.

For some of you here today, this might be a new insight. You might have always thought that you have to clean up your life and perform a lot of good works before God will accept you into His family. If that’s the case, I hope you leave here today believing - actually believing - that salvation is a gift that God freely gives to those who believe (even you).

Others of you here today have known for years and years that a person is declared righteous on the basis of his/her faith, not works. You might be tempted to dismiss this passage and this message as a “given” - something that you don’t need to think about anymore. As you’ve probably guessed by now, I think that would be a huge mistake. The truth that we are justified by faith and not by works not only explains how we enter into a relationship with God; it also informs how we live out our relationship with God. We enter the Christian life by faith and we live the Christian life by faith.

If you’ve known for a long time that a person is “justified by faith and not by works” this passage might help you “press the reset button” in your relationship with God. Maybe a works-mentality has crept into your thinking. Maybe you need to begin trusting God the same way you did when you first believed. Maybe you’ve missed some of the implications of this foundational truth.

Today’s passage states very plainly that we are justified by faith and not by works. And then it articulates four implications of this reality.

First, ***Because we are justified by faith, we have no reason to boast.*** (3:27-30)

In this paragraph Paul continues to use a literary device known as diatribe in which he raises questions so that he can address relevant issues. In verse 27 he establishes the issue he will address throughout this passage: faith vs. works. In light of what Paul has said about being justified by faith, he asks these questions:

27 Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.

As we’ve discussed in past weeks, the Jewish people had legitimate spiritual advantages because of their covenant with YHWH. They had the Scriptures and the promises of God. But even though they had advantages, the Jewish people had no reason to boast: Boasting “is excluded.”

Paul next explains why he could make that claim. “By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.” Some scholars think that Paul is describing the old covenant in two different ways here: the Law understood in terms of works and the Law understood in terms of faith. That understanding is certainly possible, but I tend to agree with those who see the term “law” as referring to an overarching principle or “system of demands” (Moo, p. 249). Throughout Romans works and faith are contrasted; they are two competing systems of demands.

In other writings Paul certainly advocated believers being zealous for good works (see Titus 2:14, 3:14). But when it came to our standing before God, God doesn’t demand “works” (either works of the Law or any other kind of works); He demands “faith.” If God demanded works, we might have a reason to boast about what we’ve done to please God. But since He demands faith, our confidence lies in what God has done. Therefore boasting is excluded. In verse 28 Paul states plainly:

28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

Paul was eager to establish that a person can’t be justified both by faith **and** by works. So here he states unequivocally that “a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law.” In verse 29 Paul establishes that a relationship with God can’t be based on the works of the Law (which was given to the Jews for a limited period of time); otherwise God would merely be one of many tribal deities.

29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

When Paul says, “the circumcision” in verse 30, he is referring to the Jewish people since circumcision was the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham, the “father of the Jews.” Correspondingly, “the uncircumcised” refers to non-Jews or Gentiles. Paul is establishing that God has authority over everyone - both Jews and Gentiles. And since “God is one” we would expect that God would justify in only one way. We wouldn’t expect that He declare some people righteous because of their faith and others righteous because of their works. Since everyone is justified by faith, nobody has reason to boast.

This has significant implications for how we view ourselves in relation to others. I hope that nobody here would say, “God sure is fortunate to have me on His side. When I came to Christ, I was quite a catch because I brought so much wisdom and commitment and influence to the cause of Christ.” If you think that you haven’t really been justified by faith. By definition, when we trust in Jesus we are admitting that we are so sinful that He had to die for our sins. We come to God in humility because we come empty-handed with nothing to offer.

This mindset of humility (which is the opposite of boasting) should continue with us throughout our lives. When we understand that we’re declared righteous because of our faith, boasting is excluded permanently; we walk in humility. Are you walking in humility

these days? Are you generous and gracious to the people with whom you live and work and worship? Humility is the way of life that is compatible with being justified by faith with no reason to boast.

[Note: Paul uses the future tense “God who *will justify*” the circumcised by faith. This reflects that people will ultimately be declared righteous on the last day, the “day of the Lord” even though we experience that righteousness ahead of time (here and now).]

Second, ***Because we are justified by faith, we can now fulfill the true intent of the Law.*** (3:31) This is the point Paul makes in verse 31. He anticipates that some would accuse him of insulting and devaluing the Law by his stress on faith.

31 Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

People charged that justification by faith nullifies (or invalidates) the Law. Paul strenuously disagreed: “On the contrary, we [who are justified by faith] establish the Law.” Paul doesn’t say here ***how*** we establish the Law, but I think he is ultimately saying what he expresses in chapter 8, namely that as we walk by the Spirit in the new covenant we fulfill the true intent of the Law (loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves). In chapter 13 Paul will say that “love is the fulfillment of the law” (see 13:8-10). If you have been justified by faith in Jesus, your life is supposed be a shining example of what the Law really intended, especially when it comes to the way you love God and others.

Most people begin the Christian life with great enthusiasm and zeal. We begin reading the Scriptures and we trust Him with simple, childlike faith. “God says that He cares for me more than the birds and the flowers, so I have no reason to worry!” But quite often the disappointments add up and we begin expecting less and less from God. Consequently, instead of our lives fulfilling the true intent of the Law, we mainly don’t want to blow it and embarrass ourselves.

We need to return repeatedly to the same type of faith that we had when we were first justified. We need to be confident about spiritual realities about our lives even though we might not be experiencing them fully. In chapter 6 Paul will say that those who are justified by faith are “in Christ” and therefore just as alive to God as Jesus Himself. If you have been justified by faith, that is true of you. Instead of looking at yourself and your circumstances, fix your eyes on Jesus and realize that His life is your life. When you’re preoccupied with Him and the life you have in Him, loving God and loving others doesn’t seem so far fetched.

Third, ***Because we are justified by faith, everything we receive from God is by grace, not merit.*** (4:1-8)

In chapter 4 Paul discusses Abraham’s experience at length. If he can show that Abraham’s experience lines up with being justified by faith, his argument is

strengthened - first because Abraham was so revered among the Jews and second because it would reinforce how God has always regarded people's faith.

1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

For the sake of argument Paul says that *if* Abraham was justified by works, he would have something to boast about. When Paul adds "but not before God" he is refuting the whole idea of being justified by works because God alone justifies.

In verse 3 Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 to show what the Scriptures did say about Abraham's justification.

3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Scripture says that Abraham believed God and that is what "was credited to him as righteousness." Abraham was declared righteous (justified) by faith. Paul will quote Genesis 15:6 two additional times in this chapter (4:9, 22). Paul will make both theological and chronological arguments from this verse. Let's go back to Genesis 15 to pick up the context so that we don't miss the point Paul is making. Years earlier Abraham had left his home country and settled in the land of Canaan. In Genesis 15 we read this:

1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram said, "O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

Abraham (at the time Abram) simply wanted a son. But God promised, "your reward shall be very great" (v. 1), so great that his "descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the sky." Remember that when this promise was made Abraham was in his 70s and his wife Sarah was in her 60s and they hadn't been able to have kids (for decades).

Listen to Abraham's response in verse 6:

6 Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

This is the verse Paul quotes three times in Romans 4. The simple truth was that Abraham believed the promise God had made about God giving him an heir from his own body and about God making his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

After all the years of disappointment and heartache, Abraham believed God's promise. This is the first time that the verb "believe" is used in the Bible, and it is linked with righteousness (an observation made by Moo, p. 261). God's response to Abraham's faith was to "reckon it to him as righteousness." In other words, God said, "Based on your faith, I pronounce you righteous. Abraham, you have a right standing before Me."

Remember that Paul made reference to Genesis 15:6 to support his claim that "a man is justified by faith" and not by works. In verses 4 and 5 he gives an everyday illustration with which everybody agrees:

4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.  
5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,

When you work 40 or 50 or 60 hours a week, and your employer hands you your paycheck, you don't say, "Thanks so much; it's so kind and sweet of you to give me this money. . ." No, if you've worked for it, your wages are due you; they're not a favor. On the other hand, if you don't work and you're given something valuable, that's grace/gift/favor. Our righteousness falls into this category: it is something we haven't worked for; it is something we don't deserve; our righteousness is given to us simply because we believe. Therefore our justification is by grace through faith.

Paul supports the claim that God "justifies the ungodly" by quoting David's words in Psalm 32.

6 just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:  
7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven,  
And whose sins have been covered.  
8 "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

David is describing people who would have no chance with God if He were looking at their works. He's describing people who have committed "lawless deeds," not good works. And yet their lawless deeds have been forgiven, and their sins have been covered. Paul probably quoted this passage because David had written (in verse 8), "the Lord will not **take into account**" this man's sin. This is the same verb translated "credited" in verses 3, 4, 5, and 6. Whereas God credits a person's faith as righteousness, God does **not** credit our sin against us when we believe. This is pure gift.

When God "justifies the ungodly," He tells a person, "I am not going to credit your sin to your account; I am going to credit Jesus' righteousness to your account." Our relationship with God is founded on His grace; and our relationship with Him is sustained by His grace.

And yet it's not uncommon for believers to think, "I know I was saved 'by grace through faith,' but eventually I need to pull my own weight. Surely God expects me to perform."

Do you ever find yourself thinking that? It is true that God expects us to grow up; He wants to be able to have a mature relationship with us. And it is true that our behavior really matters to God. But our standing before Him is never based on works; we never earn the rewards God gives.

In what area(s) of your life do you need grace? Are you going to wait until you feel like God owes you? That will be a long wait (as in “forever”). Why not simply go to Him and ask for grace (a gift, a favor that you don’t deserve)? Hebrews 4:16 speaks of prayer as coming to the “throne of grace”; God isn’t selling anything and He’s not making deals. He’s simply giving gifts to His children.

Perhaps you (like David in Psalm 32) need a fresh cleansing from “lawless deeds” and sins. Perhaps you need God’s provision financially. Perhaps you need God to do a miraculous work in a relationship. We are justified by faith and not by works; God continues to respond to our faith, which is most commonly expressed through prayer. We simply ask because everything we receive from God is by grace.

Fourth, ***Because we are justified by faith, we each have equal access to God.***  
(4:9-12)

These verses take us back to the point that Paul made in chapter 2 when he stressed that even though the Jews had spiritual advantages, that didn’t make them insiders with God. The Gentiles have equal access to God. Here Paul ties this truth to the fact that both Jews and Gentiles are justified by faith. He makes a series of observations about Abraham’s faith.

9 Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, “Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.” 10 How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised;

This is a simple chronological argument. Genesis 15 records that Abraham was declared righteous on the basis of his faith. It wasn’t until Genesis 17 that God commanded Abraham to be circumcised. Using first century categories, Abraham was a Gentile when God declared him righteous. In verses 11 and 12 Paul draws out the implication for his readers (including us):

11 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, 12 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.

Paul’s argument is somewhat complicated, but his point is clear: Since Abraham was justified by faith long before he was circumcised, He is the “father” of all who believe. If

the Jews didn't have an inside track to God, then nobody did. Because we are justified by faith (and not works), everyone has equal access to God through Jesus.

This truth should prompt us to quit thinking that we're inferior to others spiritually. Sure, other people may have spiritual advantages that you don't, but if you are justified by faith you are in Christ and you are as close to the heart of God that you can be. You are not a spiritual outsider.

We've seen that since we are justified by faith and not works, these things are true of us:

- We have no reason to boast; we should walk in humility.
- We can now fulfill the true intent of the Law; in the new covenant we are given everything we need to love God and love others.
- Everything we receive from God is by grace; this should motivate us to go to God in prayer and simply ask.
- We each have equal access to God; everyone who believes is a spiritual insider.

These things are true of those who believe. If you are exploring the Christian faith for the first time, this is the type of life that is available to you through faith in Jesus. If you trust that His death on the cross paid for your sin, God declares you righteous and you can begin experiencing God's grace in fullest measure.

If you are already a believer, consider how you might walk in faith this coming week. I am going to pray now. As I do, let's ask God to show us ways in which we can live out these truths in specific areas of our lives.