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GOD JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY

Romans 4:1-5

By

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Romans, Lesson 20

God Justifies the Ungodly Romans 4:1-5

A faithful Catholic nun spends her life working in a slum in a poor country, feeding the poor, ministering to the sick and dying, and caring for the orphans. As she nears death, you ask her why God should let her into heaven. She replies, "Because I have devoted my life to serving Him. I have denied myself for decades. I hope that I have added enough merits that God will accept me." She dies and faces God's eternal wrath because her faith was in her own good works, not in the shed blood of Jesus Christ alone.

Meanwhile, on death row a serial killer awaits execution. He mercilessly tortured, raped, and murdered many young women. Their families mourn the tragic loss of their daughters. A chaplain visits this killer and finds that he has been reading the Bible. God has convicted him of his terrible sins, so that he despairs about dying and facing God. He knows that he deserves eternal torment in hell. But the chaplain shares that if he will believe in Jesus Christ, who died for the ungodly, God will forgive all his sins and credit Christ's righteousness to his account. He does believe, is filled with joy, and goes to his execution at peace with God. He spends eternity in the unspeakable joy of heaven.

Do these two stories grate on your soul? Do you want to scream, "Wait a minute! That's not fair! That sweet, selfless old nun *deserves* to go to heaven! That evil, depraved murderer *deserves* to burn in hell!" If that's your reaction, then you may not understand the crucial, bedrock message that Paul sets forth in our text, that...

God graciously justifies the ungodly sinner who does not work for salvation, but believes in Jesus Christ.

In Romans 4:5, Paul makes one of the most outrageous claims in all Scripture: "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." What a staggering verse! Surely, there must be a copier's error in the text! Paul must have said, "God justifies the one who tries to do his best. God justifies the nice person who always meant

well, who loved his family, devoted his time and money to help the needy, went to church, read his Bible, and prayed every day." But Paul could *not* have meant, "God justifies the ungodly, could he? That's unthinkable!"

In *All of Grace* [Ages Software], C. H. Spurgeon wrote about Romans 4:5,

I have heard that men that hate the doctrines of the cross bring it as a charge against God, that He saves wicked men and receives to Himself the vilest of the vile. See how this Scripture accepts the charge, and plainly states it! ... You thought, did you not, that salvation was for the good, that God's grace was for the pure and holy, who are free from sin? It has fallen into your mind that, if you were excellent, then God would reward you; and you have thought that because you are not worthy, therefore there could be no way of your enjoying His favor. You must be somewhat surprised to read a text like this: "Him that justifieth the ungodly." I do not wonder that you are surprised; for with all my familiarity with the great grace of God, I never cease to wonder at it.

My aim today is that all of you will understand this crucial doctrine that is at the core of the gospel and that you will join Spurgeon in worshipful wonder that God has justified *you*.

Paul is still hammering at the religious Jew (or any other religious person) who thinks that he qualifies for heaven because of his religion and good works. He brings up Abraham because the Jews revered him as the father of their nation and their faith. Many early Jewish writings put Abraham on a pedestal far higher than the way the Bible portrays him. For example, the Book of Jubilees (23:10), written about 100 B.C. states, "Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life" (cited by Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 256). The Prayer of Manasseh (8), states that God did not appoint repentance for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "who were righteous and did not sin against Thee." (What Bible were they reading?) Thus many Jews assumed that Abraham was right with God, at least in part, because of his life of obedience. It's a short step from there to believing that any person who follows Abraham's example of obeying God will be accepted by God.

But in Romans 4 Paul challenges that view head-on. The flow of thought in the chapter is as follows (from Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], pp. 210-211): In verses 1-8, Paul expands on and illustrates with Abraham and David the principle of 3:27-28, that we are justified by faith, not by our works, and thus we have no grounds for boasting. Verses 9-16 develop the theme of 3:29-30, that righteousness by faith applies equally to Jews and Gentiles. He proves this by showing that Abraham was justified *before* he was circumcised. Thus God can justify uncircumcised Gentiles who follow the faith of Abraham. Verses 17-22 explain the nature of Abraham's faith. Finally (4:23-25), Paul applies the lessons of Abraham's faith to his readers.

It's absolutely essential for you to understand the doctrine that Paul sets forth in Romans 4:1-5, that we are justified (declared righteous) by faith alone, apart from any works. It was when Martin Luther finally understood this truth that he was saved. He called justification by faith "the chief article from which all our other doctrines have flowed." He said, "If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time." He argued, "It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God, and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour." (James Boice, *Romans: Justification by Faith* [Zondervan], p. 126, citing from *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, compiled by Ewald Pass, [Concordia], 2:702-704.)

John Calvin called justification by faith "the main hinge on which religion turns" (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John McNeill [Westminster Press], 3:11:1). He explained (*ibid.*), "For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God." In other words, this truth is foundational for your entire Christian life.

Thus it is not by accident that it always has been under fire. The Catholic Church launched the counter-Reformation and published *The Canons and Decrees of Trent* in large part to attack justification by faith alone (see my "Justification by Faith Alone," Aug. 11, 1996, on fconline.org). In our day, the unity movement has sought to break down any divisions between Protestants and Catholics by

advocating that we come together where we agree and set aside the things that divide us, including this doctrine. In the 1990's, many evangelicals signed a document, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," that would relegate justification by faith alone to the sidelines. The New Perspective on Paul also argues that the Reformers misinterpreted Paul regarding this doctrine.

But if the Reformers were right that this doctrine is the foundation of our salvation, then justification by faith *plus works* cannot be right. We cannot politely agree to disagree on the core of the gospel! Thus for your own salvation, for your being able to resist the winds of false doctrine blowing in our day, and for your being able to present the gospel clearly to those who are trusting in their good works to save them, you *must* be clear on this truth: God graciously justifies the ungodly sinner who believes in Jesus Christ. Paul first demonstrates this truth in the life of Abraham (4:1-3). Then he illustrates it negatively by a common example (4:4) and states it positively in rather shocking language (4:5).

1. God justified Abraham by faith alone, not by his works (4:1-3).

Paul goes back to the theme of boasting (3:27), to argue:

- A. If Abraham had been justified by works, he would have grounds to boast (4:1-2).

"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, but not before God" (4:1-2)

Some commentators argue that the phrase, "according to the flesh," should not modify "forefather," but rather, "has found." Thus Paul would be asking whether Abraham found some way, according to the flesh apart from God's grace, to be justified. Others argue that it should modify "forefather" (NASB & ESV). Paul is referring to Abraham as the Jewish forefather by lineage; but there may also be the hint that fleshly descent from Abraham is insufficient.

Verse 2 explains ("for") verse 1, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God." Most commentators understand the last phrase to mean, "When God's viewpoint is considered, Abraham has no right to boast at

all" (Moo, p. 261). In other words, Paul does not mean that Abraham could have boasted before people, but not before God. Rather, he had no grounds for boasting at all.

But it seems to me that Paul could be conceding to his Jewish readers, "Okay, maybe Abraham has some grounds to boast before men. After all, he was a godly man. But when you bring God into the picture, Abraham's boast vanishes." It's as if one bug was bragging to another bug, "I'm taller than you are!" just before a human comes along and squashes both of them. When you compare humans to humans, Abraham was a good guy. But when you compare humans to God, Abraham is just a bug along with everyone else.

Paul's point in 4:1-2 is that if justification were by works rather than by faith alone, it would give us a ground for boasting. It would feed our pride. But such boasting is foolish, because we're really just one bug boasting to another bug. What is the best of human righteousness when you compare it to God's absolute righteousness? So Paul is attacking the popular Jewish views about Abraham in his day, saying, "He couldn't have been justified by his works." Then he supports his argument with Scripture:

B. Scripture clearly teaches that Abraham was justified by faith alone (4:3).

"For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" (4:3, citing Gen. 15:6)

Genesis 15:6 is the first time that the word *believe* is used in the Bible and it is also the first time that the concept of God crediting righteousness to anyone (justification) is mentioned. So it's a very important text to understand. Paul not only cites it here, but also in Galatians 3:6, where he argues against the Judaizers, who said that we must add our works to faith in order to be saved.

The passage in Genesis raises the question, "What did Abraham believe and why did God credit it to him for righteousness *then*?" We know that he had believed God previously, when he left Ur and set out for Canaan (Heb. 11:8). Thus Abraham was already what we would call "saved" before this experience. So why does Moses mention in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham believed God and that God reckoned it to him as righteousness?

Martin Luther said that Abraham was justified by faith long before this time, but that it is first recorded in this context in a connection where the Savior is definitely involved in order that none might venture to dissociate justification from the Savior (cited by H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* [Baker], 1:479). John Calvin thought that it is mentioned here, long after Abraham was first justified, to prove that justification does not just begin by faith, only to be perfected later by works. Rather, justification is by faith alone, apart from works, from start to finish (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], 1:408-409). So Genesis 15 ratifies Abraham's earlier faith.

Derek Kidner (*Genesis* [IVP], p. 124) notes that Abraham's faith was both personal (*in the Lord*) and propositional (the Lord's *promise* concerning a son). Abraham knew that through his seed, blessing would come to all the families of the earth (12:3). In Galatians, Paul argues that *seed* is singular, not plural, thus pointing to Abraham's one descendant, Christ (Gal. 3:16). So when Abraham believed in the Lord, he believed the specific promise that a Savior for all nations would come forth from his descendants.

How much did Abraham know about Jesus Christ, who would be born 2,000 years later? He knew more than we may assume! Jesus Himself said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Paul said that God preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham when He promised, "All the nations shall be blessed in you" (Gal. 3:8). Though he didn't know Jesus' name and he had no evidence other than God's promise, Abraham looked forward in faith to God's Redeemer and thus God credited it to him as righteousness.

The word *credited* (Greek = *logizomai*) is used 40 times in the New Testament, 34 times by Paul, 19 times in Romans, and 11 times in this chapter, so it is a key word. It's an accounting term that means that God credited to Abraham a righteousness that did not inherently belong to him (Moo, p. 262). The word *it* does not refer to Abraham's faith, as if God exchanged his faith for righteousness, in a sort of trade. That would give some sort of merit to faith, which cannot pay the debt of our sin. Rather, faith is the means by which we lay hold of God's promise in Christ. Abraham believed God's promise about the Savior who would come and God credited the work of the promised Savior to Abraham

through his faith. Christ's substitutionary death paid the just penalty for the sins of those who will trust in Him (3:25).

Having illustrated from Abraham's experience as recorded in Scripture that God justifies by faith alone, not by works, Paul proceeds to apply it to every sinner who will believe in Christ:

2. God justifies any ungodly person who does not work for salvation, but believes in Jesus Christ (4:4-5).

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

First (4:4) Paul gives a negative example from everyday life that we can easily understand. When you work and your boss pays you, he isn't doing you a favor. (*Favor* is literally *grace*.) You don't send him a thank you note, telling him how much you appreciated his kindness. No, he owes you the money. If he doesn't pay, you can take him to court to make him pay. It's a debt.

But the principle of grace is different (4:5). Under grace you do not work for justification. Rather, you believe God's promise to declare righteous any sinner who trusts in Jesus and His shed blood as the propitiation for his sins (3:25). As the righteous Judge, God recognizes Jesus' death as payment in full for all our sins. The instant we believe in Jesus, God bangs the gavel and declares, "Not guilty!" But He not only removes our sin and guilt. Also, He imputes the very righteousness of Jesus to our account.

Again, although Paul says here, "his faith is credited as righteousness," in the context (3:24-26) he means that the guilty sinner's faith has laid hold of Jesus Christ as the perfect and final sacrifice for sins. Faith is not a work that merits righteousness. If it were, verse 5 would be saying the opposite of what Paul is arguing! Faith does not merit God's favor, or grace would not be undeserved. Rather, faith means not doing anything ourselves to earn salvation, but rather trusting what Christ did for us on the cross. God justifies us as a gift through faith (3:24). Faith is the hand that receives the free gift of right standing with God apart from our works.

Let me draw out four implications of this astounding truth:

A. To be justified, you must cease working for salvation.

Paul clearly spells it out, “to the one who does *not* work....” If you try to blend your works with God’s grace, you muddy the waters of pure grace. If you work to earn justification, then God owes you something. But God will not be a debtor to anyone.

If you feel bad about your sins and are trying to get them under control so that God will accept you, you have not ceased working. You do not understand God’s grace. If you think that maybe you should become a missionary or go live and work in a slum for years, depriving yourself of the normal comforts of life, so that God will overlook your sins on judgment day, you’re still working. You do not understand His grace. To be justified by God’s grace, you must *stop working!*

B. To be justified, you must see yourself as ungodly.

God justifies only one kind of person: the *ungodly*. There is debate among scholars as to whether Paul was referring specifically to Abraham or whether he meant to contrast a notoriously sinful person with the relatively good Abraham. While Abraham was relatively good when you compare humans with humans, in God’s sight we all have sinned and fall short of His glory. Abraham was as much in need of God’s perfect righteousness as were the wicked people of Sodom. In God’s sight (Rom. 3:10), “There is none righteous, not even one.” We’re all bugs!

So if you see yourself as a basically good person, you can’t be justified. If you see yourself as better than notorious sinners and thus somehow more deserving of salvation, you can’t be justified. To be justified, you must see yourself as ungodly and deserving of God’s righteous judgment.

C. To be justified, you must believe that God will justify you, the ungodly, through the propitiation of Christ’s blood.

Faith means taking God at His word when He promises to justify the one who has faith in Jesus (3:26). You acknowledge that the wages of your sin is death (Rom. 6:23), eternal separation from the holy God. But you trust God’s promise that “while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). Faith means taking the gift of Christ’s full payment for your sins, much as you would thankfully receive a check from a wealthy

man who offered to pay a large fine that you couldn't afford to pay. Faith means trusting Jesus to be your advocate in court, to plead His shed blood in your case before the bench of God's justice.

- D. To be justified means that God credits Christ's righteousness to your account through your faith.

If justification were based on how righteous we were in actual conduct, then we could never be declared perfectly righteous in this life, because we always have some indwelling sin in us. We need Christ's perfect righteousness credited to our account. We need our sin put on Christ's account. That transaction takes place the instant that we believe in Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21).

Conclusion

Spurgeon ended that chapter in *All of Grace* by telling a story about an artist in the years before photography who painted a picture of a part of the city where he lived. For historic purposes, he wanted to include in his picture certain characters well known in the town. A street sweeper who was unkempt, ragged, and filthy was known to everyone and there was a suitable place in the picture for him. So the artist found the man and told him that he would pay him well if he would come down to the studio so that he could paint him.

He came to the studio the next day, but the artist sent him away because he had washed his face, combed his hair, and put on a suit of clean clothes. The artist needed him as a poor beggar and he was not invited in any other capacity.

Spurgeon applies it by saying that even so, God invites sinners to come at once for salvation, just as they are. Come in your disorder. Come with your confusion. Come with your despair. Come filthy, naked, and dirty. Come with all of your sin. Come to Jesus, crucified for sinners! If God justifies the ungodly and you're ungodly, there's hope for you! The best news in the world is, God graciously justifies the ungodly sinner who does not work for salvation, but rather believes in Jesus Christ!

Application Questions

1. What is wrong with the idea that good people deserve salvation, while evil people deserve hell?
2. Is it fair (just) for God to forgive an evil murderer who trusts in Christ, but to condemn a loving person who didn't trust Christ? Why/why not?
3. Is it right or wrong to join with Roman Catholics in proclaiming our common faith in Christ when we differ over justification by faith alone? Why/why not?
4. Why must I see myself as ungodly before I can be justified? Doesn't this damage one's self-esteem?

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