

By Faith
Romans 4
Dr. Jerry Nelson

I've asked you this question before, but the text before us today leads me to ask it again: Does God love YOU?

I don't mean does God love the human race.

The old Peanuts comic strip character Charlie Brown said "I love mankind, it's people I can't stand!"

Is that how God feels?

He loves mankind but he's not sure about you? - or at least you are not sure he's sure?

Does God love YOU?

I mean does he truly care about you personally?

Does he desire your welfare?

Does he sovereignly work to bring about the best for you?

Is he here now with you because he cares about you?

Does God love you?

Most people don't think so!

Many Christians don't think so.

Many Christians have, at best, a kind of bargain with God.

They expect God to keep up his end of the bargain as long as they keep up theirs.

They assume God will not punish them too severely for sin and he will take them to heaven when they die **as long as** they don't do anything too sinful and they do a reasonably good job of living like a Christian.

At root most people are convinced that their relationship with God is dependent on them - they have to get it and they have to keep it.

What arrangement do you have with God?

Let me ask the question this way?

Why would God have anything to do with you?

Why would he want to bless you and make the best happen for you?
Why would God want to answer your prayers?

Why would he care about what happens in your life?
Why would he love you?

If I had the opportunity to press you privately for an answer to that question, many of you in this place this morning would tell me in various ways that God loves you because God is love **and** because you are at least trying to not “mess up.”

I’m increasingly convinced that most people are afraid of God.
They are afraid of God because they only know the truth that “God is love” abstractly not personally AND they know that far too often they aren’t trying all that hard.
They are afraid God may **not** actually love them because they don’t deserve his love.

Again, even many **Christians** **mis**understand grace and faith.
When they do something they know is contrary to God’s law, especially if it is a “big” sin (according to their own standard), or if it is a sin they have repeated many times, they wonder if God can forgive them.
And with that question comes the follow-up question:
“Am I even a Christian?”

That very question on the mind of a true Christian along with fear and logic that drive it, places in doubt our understanding of the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

How many people keep themselves from experiencing the unconditional love of God because they insist on finding something in themselves that would account for God’s loving them or not loving them?

How many people live in the fear of God because they don’t know the basis of the love of God?

I want you to hear again this morning the basis of a relationship with God.

And for some of you who are **not yet Christians**, it will be a radically new way of thinking about it.

And for some of you who are **already Christians** it will be a radically new way of thinking about it **because** since you became a Christian you have once again slipped back into living by law rather than grace.

You are living in fear instead of faith.

At the end of chapter 3 of the book of Romans Paul stated a fundamental and all-important principle of Christianity.

Miss this principle and you miss it all.

On this principle hangs the difference between experiencing the love of God and experiencing the wrath of God.

Chapter 3:28 “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”

Now it is that principle that Paul will expound in chapter 4.

To bring some of you “up to speed” on what we have seen thus far in our study of this letter to the Romans, it is necessary for just a minute to go back to the first chapters:

In the first 2 ½ chapters Paul has given an airtight argument proving that all human beings of all ages and all places are under the wrath of God because

whether they were religious or irreligious, whether they have ever heard about Jesus or not, -

all people know enough about the true God even from nature and conscience that to reject that knowledge about God, and they all do reject it, means they deserve to be punished.

In the middle of Chapter 3 Paul quotes from the OT to make the point he has already been making: “There is no one righteous, not even

one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God...there is no one who does good not even one.”

And thus Paul concludes in 3:19 “Every mouth will be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God” on the day when Jesus comes again.

After giving the bad news in the first 2 ½ chapters Paul finally gets around to his reason for writing - there is almost unbelievably good news - 3:21 “BUT NOW a righteousness from God has been revealed.”

God has said that we are unrighteous, unholy, sinful and therefore, on our own, we cannot have a relationship with a righteous, holy, perfect God.

But what God did was come to this earth in the person of his own Son, Jesus - God came and on the cross took our sin upon himself and took his own wrath against that sin.

As I mentioned last week, quoting John Stott, “God gave himself to save us from himself.” (Stott p115)

And what God offers us is forgiveness for our sins - because Jesus paid for them **AND** he offers us His own righteousness in place of our sins.

Look at 3:22 “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ.”

Now it is possible for us to come into the presence of a holy God not in our own right (we don't have any - we deserve wrath), coming into God's presence in the righteousness of God's Son, Jesus.

God now accepts us because we come in Jesus' right.

But how does that “righteousness from God” become ours?

Verse 22 declared it: “this righteousness from God comes through faith”

And so we are back to that great fundamental principle of FAITH.

Which brings us back to the principle as stated in 3:28 “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law”

When Paul wrote that he was writing in essence the same thing he said in 3:22 but with the addition of what doesn’t justify a person - “observing the law” doesn’t justify us.

To be justified is to be declared “not guilty” because our guilt has been removed by Jesus’ death in our place.

To have the “righteousness from God” is the positive side of the same coin - it is to have the holiness from God we need to have a relationship with him.

Now I challenge you again - even though the words are familiar to many of you - the concept may have been forgotten, because you have spent years assuming that your relationship to God, while of grace, is **still somehow based on what you do** - and you live in fear not freedom, you live by law not faith.

Now let’s see how Paul unpacks this principle of justification through faith in chapter 4.

In the first 21 verses Paul will give the principle again and then specifically cite and illustrate how works do not result in a right relationship with God and how faith does result in that right relationship with God.

In V22 he will reiterate the principle once more
And in Vv23-25 he will apply it to us.

Let’s go back to the beginning of the chapter where Paul describes the principle in detail:

Verse1 “What then shall we say that Abraham our forefather discovered in this matter?”

What matter? The matter of justification by faith not works (3:28)

Verse3 “What does the Scripture say?”

Here Paul states the positive side of the principle - “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness.”

By what means was Abraham declared righteous?

In Verse 2 Paul said that **if** Abraham had been justified, **if** he had received a right relationship with God, by works then he would have had reason to boast or to take personal credit - but by what means was Abraham declared righteous?

“Abraham believed God” - he trusted God - it was by faith.

That flew right in the face of what many of the Jews taught in Paul’s day.

Jewish rabbis said “Abraham was perfect in all deeds...all the days of his life.” (Book of Jubilee 23.10) And that “Abraham’s **faithfulness** was (credited) unto him for righteousness.” (1 Maccabees 2:52 in Stott, 123

See also Cranfield p84)

Note the crucial difference – Paul said “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness.”

The Jews were saying “Abraham’s **faithfulness** was (credited) unto him for righteousness.”

In other words, they said Abraham earned his right standing with God by being a faithful, obedient to God, man.

In the next two verses Paul says they are wrong:

If you work and get wages, the wages are not a gift - they are owed to you, they are an obligation.

If it is earned (then by definition) it is not a gift.

If it’s a gift, then by definition, it is unearned.

No, he says, you can’t earn a gift.

Paul is declaring something that most human beings find hard to believe - **to the person who simply trusts God to justify him** (to forgive him and declare him righteous) to that person gives the gift of righteousness - a right standing with God.

In verses 6-8 we see this very same righteousness by faith principle:

Paul reminds us that David is an example of a man who had a right relationship with God not based at all on what he has done but solely on grace through faith.

Quoting from Psalm 51 in verse 8 David said, “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.”

God does the unusual. What the person deserved didn't happen.

Instead something entirely different happened – forgiveness, all of grace, by faith not by works.

David had broken three of the commandments (Coveting, adultery and murder)

There was no sacrificial provision for such premeditated sin – See David's cry in 51:16,17 "You do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

One Bible scholar writes: "And if we examine the remainder of Psalm 51 to discover the ground (basis) on which David is acquitted, it appears that he simply acknowledged his guilt and cast himself in faith upon the mercy of God." (FF Bruce Romans p 111)

David didn't do a thing to try **to make up for** his sin.

Every OT saint was saved by exactly the same means by which we are saved - by grace through faith not works.

And every OT saint was forgiven for his sins committed **after** he became a believer, by exactly the same means by which we are forgiven - by grace through faith.

By contrast, we are so often inclined to what I have before called "evangelical penance":

Even as believers we are still convinced that we have to do something to find God's favor, so we say to ourselves:

"I have sinned and now I must make up for it somehow.

We will live in misery for a while until we feel that now maybe we can trust God to have forgiven us BECAUSE we punished ourselves long enough.

Or we say, "I will live better from now on." - the promise becomes my offering to God - a premise on which God can base his forgiveness.

God will forgive BECAUSE I will do better next time."

If it is a sin we have committed too many times then maybe we'll just give up.

We won't expect any favors from God.

We'll just live hoping that when we die we'll be okay.

All of these actions are based on the thinking that I must somehow do something to earn the forgiveness - to regain God's favor.

But what does God say to that?

Romans 4:5 "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."

God doesn't justify good people.

As Jesus said, the righteous don't need it.

But of course that must have been said somewhat tongue in cheek since there is none righteous.

God justifies the wicked, the sinner.

This is a most amazing statement that runs counter to all our human understanding of justice.

Paul doesn't say that God justifies the sinner after the sinner has dealt with his own sin by making up for it.

No, God justifies him while he is still a sinner.

How? We have already seen that Christ dies in our stead and gives us his righteousness.

So on what basis is forgiveness and Christ's righteousness credited to us?

Again, Romans 4:5 "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, **his faith is credited as righteousness.**"

Now for the next couple of paragraphs Paul is going to camp on the idea that justification, a right relationship with God, is not by works.

He wants to drive that point home.

In Romans 4:9-12 Paul will argue that a right relationship with God does not come about through attention to the proper religious exercises.

Specifically he mentions circumcision, that sine qua non of Judaism.

“Of course I’m one of God’s chosen people, I’ve been circumcised.”

In verse 10 the question is asked about when Abraham’s faith was credited to him for righteousness - was it before or after his circumcision.

Clearly it was before.

And so, Paul writes in Romans 4:11, Circumcision was the sign he received after he was granted “**the righteousness that he had by faith** while he was still uncircumcised.”

Just as clearly then, **it wasn’t his obedient act of circumcision that was credited to him for righteousness, but it was his faith.**

Yes, Abraham obeyed God, but his obedience came after his faith - it came after God granted Christ’s righteousness to Abraham.

Abraham was saved through faith alone, not through his religious rituals.

When people are asked on what basis they think God will accept them, it is most often answered:

“Well, if I’m a good Christian” “If I try to live a good life, go to church, serve my fellow man, am baptized, and take communion.”

“If I live in relative conformity to the rules and rituals of my religion, I think God will accept me. - after all, God is fair.”

But as we’ve said so many times before, “You don’t want God to be fair” - If he were fair he’d annihilate everyone of us, for we have all sinned against him.

The whole point Paul is making is that you don't want to come into the presence of God in your own righteousness because you don't have any- you need God's righteousness and that comes through faith alone - not through the proper religious affiliation or activities.

The other major point Paul is making in verses 9-12, that he carries into the next section, is that everyone comes to God the same way - whether they are Jew or Gentile - it is by faith not by religious affiliation or ritual.

Now in verse 13-17 Paul will tell us a **second way by which a right relationship to God does NOT come:**

V13 "It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise" –

It is not through keeping the law of God that we are given a right relationship with God.

In verse 14 Paul writes that if we get the promise of God - the righteousness of God, a right relationship with God- by keeping the law then faith and grace are of no value.

It can't be both - it is either by grace through faith or it is earned.

And in verse 15 he reminds us why keeping the law won't work: "law brings wrath."

The law shows us how we are wrong and condemned we are, but it gives us no help in obeying it - we are unable to obey it.

Remember once again the point is that a right relationship with God can only be gained **and kept** by faith not works.

That second part is where many Christians get it wrong.

Many assume they become a Christian by grace through faith alone but that they remain a Christian by what they do.

Soon after they become a Christian they start trying to keep the law of God in order to stay in God's favor.

If they were asked what is the basis of their on-going relationship to

God they would say obedience - "As long as I obey".
 And as I mentioned earlier- they live in fear.

But on what is our right relationship with God truly based?
 It is not based at all on our efforts to be a good Christian.
 It is based solely on God's grace through faith.

When Paul in Romans 6:14 wrote, "We are not under law but under grace" some immediately thought it can't be as simple as faith.

Their response was: "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?"

That's how we who live under law still think:

If we don't have to obey then we won't.

If there is no threat then we will sin willfully
 and often.

But though it is not part of the Chapter 4 passage, Paul is convinced that if we truly understood that we have been made right with God wholly of grace and that our actions had nothing to do with it -

if we knew how unconditionally we are loved our hearts would rise up to want to obey God not because of threat but because of love.

And when saved by grace through faith, the Holy Spirit of God indwells us and he gives us both the desire and the ability to begin to truly obey the Lord for his glory rather than ours.

And now in Verses 17-21 Paul will turn from writing about what doesn't result in the righteousness of God to what does!

If works, if religious rituals, if law-keeping, can't give us a right relationship with God then what can? FAITH!

And in these next verses Paul will describe that faith.

And he will describe it in terms of faith's **object** and faith's **action**.

The kind of faith Paul is describing is faith **in something**.

Some people believe that faith is what makes things happen -

as if faith, in itself, had the power to do things.

Faith has no power - **faith accesses power.**

Real faith believes in something or someone.

Abraham, who is the example in much of this chapter, is also the example in 4:17-21.

Here, again, he is the example of saving faith.

And the first thing is to notice that his faith is in God.

Verse 17 "(Abraham) is our father in the sight of **God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead...**"

That's explained in verse 19:

God had promised Abraham that Abraham would have a child and that in particular he would have a son by his wife Sarah.

Most of you know that the promise was made when Abraham was already in his 80s and Sarah in her 70s.

When it comes to having children, they were as good as dead but God caused barren old Sarah to conceive by her old husband Abraham.

Abraham believed in the God who gives life to the dead.

And again, in whom has Abraham placed his faith?

Romans 4:21 says Abraham was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."

Abraham had had experience with this God - God was trustworthy.

If God said it would happen then Abraham would believe him **even if** there were no other evidence to support it.

So saving faith's object is Jesus and saving faith's action is simply trusting Jesus to do what he says he will do.

Abraham's faith fought against and overcame the temptation to doubt or deny God's promises.

All the physical circumstances demanded a different conclusion but Abraham believed God.

One author wrote: “Faith is being enabled to rest on the promise alone, refusing to demand visible or tangible signs.” (Cranfield p95)

One of the greatest hindrances to the good news is the issue of grace.

We cling so desperately to the idea that we must somehow deserve God’s favor.

We have an equally difficult time with the idea of faith.

Many times I have had people say to me, “It just can’t be that simple.”

Do you mean all I have to do is believe Jesus and he makes it all happen – he declares me forgiven and also righteous in God’s sight? Yes!

But how can I know he will do what he says. That’s faith.

If you abandon all your ways of saving yourself and trust him to do so he will.

It is truly that simple. That’s the good news.

What we can’t possibly do, God does by simply trusting him.

About 8 years ago, I read to you a children’s book that I think illustrates faith’s action very well.

“Billy and the Attic Adventure” READ

Will you simply trust Jesus?

He is your righteousness, he alone is your access to a holy God!

Verse 22 then reiterates the results of such faith:

Romans 4:22 “This is why it (faith) was credited to him for righteousness”

Abraham came to God not seeking to earn his relationship with God- he simply came in faith believing God would do what God had said.

And God responds to that faith with the free gift of God’s own righteousness.

Paul then ends the matter by bringing the whole issue up in time to his own day and to those Roman readers.

And in so doing he sends it forward 2000 more years to our day and to us.

It is said so well in Vv23-25 “The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

Let me ask again the questions I began with:

Does God love you?

Why would God have anything to do with you?

What is the basis of your relationship with God?

God says it is by grace alone through faith alone.

Will you simply trust him?

Will you just believe him when he says your relationship with God is established by faith alone?

Will you believe him that when you attempt to bring anything else you pervert the relationship - for you turn it from grace to works and you turn it from God’s mercy to your efforts.

Will you just trust him, believe him?

Cease trying to earn his favor?

Bask in his unconditional love?

Victor Hugo wrote, “The supreme happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved... in spite of ourselves.”

Rest in the security of his love based not on your actions but solely in his grace.

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