

Romans: Faith, Grace and the Spiritual Seed

Romans 4:16-17

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December 24, 2000

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 4. Today, we're going to try and answer a question, and that question is simple. Why is justification by faith? Why is it that God saves us by trusting in Jesus Christ as He has set forth in the gospel message, and all its glory, and the Christmas message, and the Easter message and the message of Christ's birth and death on our behalf that we might be received into glory? Why is it that God uses faith and not something else as the instrument whereby we receive that gift that he has granted to us in Jesus Christ? Why is justification by faith?

Now perhaps you'll appreciate somewhat that question a bit more if you'll review with me for a few minutes what we've learned so far in the last few weeks, and in reviewing that why don't we listen in onto a conversation that Paul has been having with the Roman Christians. Remember, in the church in Rome there were two groups. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Christians who had grown up in Jewish homes, had learned the faith, had learned the Old Testament, and had embraced Jesus as the Messiah, taught in the Old Testament in the Bible of their day, and Christians who were from Gentile backgrounds. They had none of the advantages of learning the Old Testament, of learning the laws of Moses, of being taught the words of the prophets. Both of those kinds of Christians were together in the church in Rome. And Paul is anxious that both of them understand very fully the way of salvation. He's concerned that they understand how God has made both of those groups to be as one. For so many years the Jewish Christians had been taught by their parents to keep strictly separate from the Gentiles. Now Paul is teaching that they are both groups now part of one body, one family, one people, the church. And he wants them to understand that. He wants them to know that the law apart from grace will condemn them. He doesn't want their trust to be focused on the law. Especially the Jewish Christians had experienced — there was a corporate memory of the exile.

Just like many of us still remember The War, and we know what war we're talking about, so also they remembered the exile. And they remembered that God had said because of your disobedience to My word, and especially to My day, I'm

going to send you into exile, into captivity for seventy years. And they came out of that captivity making sure that they weren't going to forget the law. But as a result, many of them trusted in the law as that which guaranteed for them the promises and inheritance that God had made for them. And Paul wanted them to understand that it's not the law that saves them, in fact it's the law that condemns them. It's grace that saves them. And then he wants them to know that the old signs of the old covenant mean nothing apart from their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Circumcision doesn't mean anything he says, unless you realize what it ultimately points to and signifies and that which has been accomplished and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

And, of course, above all he wants them to know how it is that God goes about justifying us by faith. And so he lays out his arguments. In Romans 3:21 through 31, he gives his arguments for justification by faith, and then in Romans, chapter 4, he begins defending that argument, and elaborating on that argument. And you get a feel for somewhat of the objections that would have been coming against his teaching.

You can hear someone, for instance, at the beginning of chapter 4, saying, "Well Paul, look, Abraham was justified by works. It is very clear. He was such a righteous man, he was willing to sacrifice his own son. That surely earned for him the inheritance that God had given to him." And so Paul, in Romans 4, verses 1 through 3, says, "Well, actually, Abraham was declared to be a righteous man by God before he did that." Long before he was willing to sacrifice Isaac, he was declared by God to be a righteous man apart from those works. In fact, his failings are pretty apparent right around the incident in which he was declared to be a righteous man.

And then someone comes back and says, "But Paul, God tells us that He cares about what we do, and how we live. In fact, the Bible, speaking of the Old Testament tells us that He will judge us by our works, our lives." And Paul says, "Yes." But in Romans 4, verses 4 through 8 he points out that David asserts that the blessed man is not the man who is righteous in and of himself, but the blessed man is the man that God does not count his sins against him. So it's very interesting. The blessed man is not the law keeper. The blessed man is the law breaker who is not counted as a law breaker. And David said that, Paul points out, in Psalm 32. It's not just any old Joe, it's not just some Tom, Dick and Harry. It's David, the sweet singer of Israel, says, "The blessed man is the man that God doesn't count his sins against him."

And then someone says, "Yes, but the blessedness that David is talking about is a blessedness that is reserved for people in Israel. It's reserved for Israel, for those who are under the Mosaic law." And Paul again, says, "Actually, it is for Jew or Gentile." That blessedness is for Jew or Gentile, it's for the circumcised and the uncircumcised, it's for those who know and keep the Mosaic ceremonial law and trust in Jesus. And it's for those who don't know the Mosaic law, have

never heard of it and never kept it. And they trust in Jesus. It's for everyone, in fact. And he does so, he proves this by saying, "You know how I know that? Because Abraham was a Gentile when he was justified. Abraham was an uncircumcised Gentile when he was declared righteous by God. Therefore, salvation must be by faith and grace for both Jews and Gentiles. Because Abraham was justified as a Gentile before he was circumcised."

And then someone says, "Yes, but Abraham received his inheritance because of his own righteousness." And last week, we saw Paul respond to that in verses 13 through 15. He says, "Actually, Abraham became heir of the world, not by his own righteousness, but by faith. He received something that he didn't deserve, and he received it by faith. Not by law keeping, not by his own righteousness, but by faith. And furthermore," he says, "law will only get you condemned. If you put your trust in the law for your salvation, you will find that the law will condemn you." And then somebody responds to that, and they say, "Yeah, but Paul, God wants us to be holy. God wants us to live in righteousness, God wants us to obey His word. Why would He justify us by faith alone, if He wants us to be righteous? Why is justification by faith and faith alone?" Good question. Paul is going to get to it in the passage we're going to look at today. Let's look at verses 16 and 17.

For this reason, it is by faith that it might be in accordance with grace in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all. As it is written, "A Father of many nations have I made you" in the sight of him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your word. We pray that You would open our eyes by it to respond to Jesus Christ in faith. This we ask in His name, Amen.

Why is justification by faith? You've heard the question. The objections that have been put to Paul. Paul, God wants us to be holy. He wants us to live as righteous people, He wants us to obey His word? Why would He justify us by faith alone then, apart from our own righteousness? Why would the main consideration be our trust in Him, apart from anything that we do if He wants us to be righteous people? Good question. In Romans 4, verses 16 and 17 is Paul's answer and explanation of that. And I'd like you to look at it in two parts. First in verse 16, then in verse 17.

I. Why is justification by faith?

In verse 16, Paul answers that question. Why is it that God has determined to justify us, to declare us righteous, by faith alone? And he answers that question really telling us three things. He tells us that justification is by faith, because the law brings wrath. He tells us that justification is by faith because faith corresponds to grace, and he tells us that justification is by faith because faith opens the door to the Gentiles. All three of those things he says is in that tiny little verse. Let's look at it closely.

Why is justification by faith? Well, he's already told us in verse 15, the law brings wrath. Apart from grace, the progression is always law, transgression and sin. Paul is speaking to a people as we've already said, who has an enormous respect for the law. They had come to see how important it was to be loyal to the God of Israel by being faithful in obedience to His commands. But they had become warped in their understanding to the point that they trusted in the law as opposed to the promise. They put trust in their own law keeping as opposed to God's gracious promises for their saving relationship with Him. And so the apostle Paul has to correct this misunderstanding of the law. If you had asked them, how is a man made right with God? "Well, by keeping the law," is the response. And he says, "Oh, no, far from it. In fact the law will bring you only one thing. Condemnation and wrath." Apart from grace the law will only bring you condemnation and wrath. Why? Because that progression is always there. Where there is law, there is law breaking. Every single one of us has this innate tendency. We're happily minding our own business, and then we find out that there is a rule. And the minute we hear that there's a rule there, we're tempted to break it. And it works both ways. We may find out that we're not supposed to do something, and we've never had the urge to do that before. And the minute we find out that we're not supposed to do that, you say, "Oh really? We're not supposed to do that?" And you have this insatiable desire to do it. Or you're told to do something, and you've never had a problem with doing that before, but suddenly you're told to do it, and suddenly you don't want to do it. The parents even us this principle with children. Don't you eat that broccoli. What is it that works about that? Suddenly broccoli becomes appealing? Where there is law, there is transgression. There is this innate tendency in a fallen human being to go in the direction of breaking of transgressing God's law. And so Paul says, "Don't look to the law to save you." The law is actually going to even exaggerate that tendency on your part to go against God apart from grace. So the progression will be law, transgression, and then, of course, God's condemnation. He's just. He doesn't just sweep sin under the carpet. He's righteous, he deals with sin. He doesn't ignore it. He despises it, and, therefore, His condemnation - so don't look to the law for your salvation.

And again this objection comes to Paul. But wait a second, Paul. The law itself has a provision for God's favor towards us even when we sin. I mean the law itself has a provision that if we repent, He forgives us. And the law itself has a provision that if we sin, we are to give alms in order to make restitution, and the law itself has atonement. You know, if we sin we make sacrifices, and we're

made right. So the law itself provides for ways that we can be made right with God according to the law. And Paul says, "You need to understand that this is far more radical than you ever dreamt. Repentance means nothing if there is not rectification of the problem. Atonement of animals, the blood of bulls and goats means nothing unless there's a real sacrifice that satisfies sin. So even those elements of the law which God graciously gave you in order to provide sort of an external reconciliation with Him mean nothing if they're not fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Those aren't sub-provisions of the law, they're the big picture. Grace is a bigger category than just these sub-points in the law. You've got to think about grace, and you've got to think about law in ways far different than you've ever conceived them before. And so he goes back to his argument.

Why is justification by faith? Not only because the law brings wrath, but also because faith is in accordance with grace. That's what He says, in order that it may be in accordance with grace. Faith, the instrument, makes sense working with grace.

What is grace? Well, grace is God's favor. It's more than that. Grace is God's favor despite our deserving of condemnation. Sometimes you've heard the acrostic grace is God's Riches at Christ's Expense. That's good. But more specifically, it's God's favor, despite our demerit. We not only don't deserve God's favor, we have not only not done something positively to earn or to warrant that favor, we have done things negatively to even more not deserve that favor. And yet human beings so often think that they have a vested interest in and right to the favor and mercy of God. We like to think we can earn salvation, and when God isn't impressed with our labors, we take some umbrage at that.

I have lots of Uncle Rosser stories. My aunt had a very colorful uncle named Rosser, who had not parted with ninety cents out of every dollar that he ever earned. And one of her cousins worked for him all day one Saturday, starting at 6:00 in the morning and worked until the sun went down until about 8:00 at night. He rode his bike over to the house to work in the yard, and he worked like a dog. He didn't even take a lunch break, and he had visions of the huge income that he was going to make off of working for Uncle Rosser. I mean he was expecting – I'm going to get at least twenty-five, thirty bucks out of this. I'm going to be rich. At the end of the day Rosser comes out and hands him a five dollar bill. And he says, "Do you have change?" He was very disappointed. And yet that's the way a lot of us look at God. We think we've done so much, and that He owes us salvation. We've earned it after all.

But that's not the picture. It's more like this. Someone pulls out their family silver. It's been in the family for six generations, ever since they came to the United States, it's been in the family. They pull out the family silver, and they say, "Friend I want to give this as a gift to you." And you scrounge around quickly in your pocket, and you pull out three crumpled dollar bills, and say, "Oh, I couldn't accept this. Let me give you something for it."

You see, what we can offer God can't match the grace of His offering. He's given His Son. What gift is it per chance that you were going to pull out of your pocket the offer for His Son. He sent His Son into the world to die for you. What gift is it? What earning are you going to do to merit. What are you going to do to merit, to warrant, to earn, to deserve Jesus' coming into the world? Now you see Paul says, "Faith is in accordance with the principle of grace." Faith doesn't say, okay, what do I need to do to deserve this? Faith looks away from ourselves, and it looks to what God has provided. And with an empty hand, simply receives what God has given by favor. God didn't look at us and say, "Well, there's something in them that deserves so much to be saved, I'm going to give My Son." The Father in His love, loved us apart from what we were, despite what we were, and gave His Son. And faith simply looks away from ourselves and looks to God. And so Paul says, "Look, faith works with grace." If salvation is a gift, does it make sense to say okay, salvation is a gift, I'll earn the gift by works. That makes no sense. You don't earn a gift. You receive a gift, and faith is in accordance with receiving that gift. That's the second argument that Paul gives as to why justification is by faith. Because faith works with grace. Works don't work with grace. You can't earn grace, you simply receive it. And the way that God has appointed it is the way of faith. Why is salvation by faith? Why is justification by faith?

Thirdly, Paul says, "So that God's covenant promise to Abraham can be fulfilled." This may be the most surprising thing that he says in the passage. The other two points he's really made at other points in his argument. This is something new though. He says, "Justification is by faith in order that God will be shown to be faithful to the promise that He made to Abraham." And you're like me, you're scratching your head. I don't know, help me here. I don't know. Explain that.

Well, Paul points out in this passage and in verse 17 that as part of the promise to Abraham, that those who are under the law and those who were not. Those who were circumcised, and those who were not. Those who were of Israel, those who were of the nations were going to be what? Spiritual children of Abraham. Look at what he says in verse 17. "A father of many nations I have called you." Now Paul says, "Think about that for a second. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. Now if Abraham is going to be the father of many nations, then the way that you receive salvation can't be the Mosaic law, because no nation but Israel keeps the Mosaic law. No nation but Israel has circumcision as the command of Moses. No nation but Israel has the ceremonial code, the dietary laws, and the various other separation laws. No nation but Israel. So if God is going to give the nations to Abraham as his spiritual inheritance, then it's got to be through some other means than the Mosaic law. It's by faith," Paul says. It had to be by faith, not the Mosaic code in order to come to both Jews and Gentiles. So justification is by faith. Why? Because the law condemns you. Because faith is in accordance with grace and because in order to be the father of many nations, God had to appoint a way for many nations to

receive the promise apart from the Mosaic code.

Why is it by faith? Because the promise was not only for Abraham, but for all his descendants, Jew or Gentile. You see the picture of God sending His Son into the world is a picture of the way of salvation. God, when He looked down upon us in our misery, didn't say, "Okay, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to establish seven principles whereby you save yourselves." He sends a rescue operation into the world through His Son. He says, "There's nothing down there that can help them out of the mess that they're in. There's nothing within them that I can call upon or that they can call upon to save themselves. So I'm going to send someone, My Son, from without their world and experience into their world and experience to live and die in their place. And by that, His righteousness, I am going to declare them righteous as they receive it by faith."

You so often hear people say, "You want to be successful? Look within." And there are a lot of people that sort of translate that into the spiritual world. Want to be successful? Look within. And that's exactly opposite from what God is saying. He's saying, you want to be condemned? Look within. You want to be saved? Look up. Look out. Look to Jesus Christ. God sends someone into our experience in order to be righteous in our place in order to die in our place. This picture of God sending His Son into the world is a picture of the way of salvation. He provides it. We receive it by faith.

You know, it's not often that you hear Mark Twain quoted with favor in this pulpit. But to show you that even pagans sometimes see this point, I ran across a quote a few months ago that goes like this: "Heaven goes by favor," he says. "If it went by merit, your dog would go in, and you would go out." You know, he's right. I wish he had believed it himself, but he's right. Justification is by faith because it accentuates divine grace. We're saved by God's favor, by His mercy, by His gift. You can't earn that. There's nothing that you can do to earn that. That's the glory of every carol that you sing this season. You're talking about God sending someone into the world that you didn't deserve.

II. Justification by faith is necessary for the fulfillment of God's covenant promise

And secondly, in verse 17, Paul makes it clear that justification by faith is necessary for the fulfillment of God's covenant promise. He really mentioned this principle in verse 16, but he elaborates on it here. As it is written, "A father of many nations I have made you, in the presence of he whom he believed, even God who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist." The promise of the inheritance of the Gentiles was central in God's promise to Abraham. So there has to be a way to fulfill it. God had promised that the nations would be His children. And so there had to be a way for God to fulfill that. What's the way? Faith. This promise was made by God Himself. Notice how Paul

emphasizes, "In the presence of him whom he believed." Even God. But this also stresses, doesn't it, Abraham's faith. He was one who believed in God. Paul here is emphasizing God's power when he says, "God who gives life to the dead." Perhaps he's alluding to the way that God opened the womb of Sarah, this woman who was way, way past the days of child bearing, and who was childless. And he opens that womb, which was as it were, a grave, and he brings life from Sarah.

And then he goes on to speak as well of the one who calls into being, that which does not exist. And this phrase perhaps points to that multitude of descendants. Abraham had this sort of name which was all out of proportion. He was a childless man, his name meant great father, exalted father. He had no children. He, too, was a man way past child bearing years. And God, in his mercy, granted him that which did not exist when he came to him in relationship with him, when He found him in Ur of the Chaldees. He opens up the womb of Sarah, and He gives multitudes of descendants to Abraham, when that was all but impossible.

Think of it, my friends. God made a promise to Abraham 4000 years ago that his spiritual seed would be numberless, and that he would be the father of many nations. And today, two billion people on this planet worship the seed of Abraham. It's an amazing thing, isn't it? God is able to do beyond all that we ask or think. But this phrase also reflects Abraham's faith in God, even in the case of Isaac's death. Would you turn with me to Hebrews, chapter 11, verse 19. While you do, let me make a confession. I always thought that Abraham's faith in God, during the time when God commanded him to go to a land, a mountain that he would appoint, and sacrifice his son, I always believed that Abraham thought that the Lord would provide a substitute. But Hebrews 11, verse 19, tells us that the way that Abraham was able to maintain his faith in the face of having sacrificed his own son, was not in expecting a substitute. Listen to what Hebrews 11:19 says: "He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which He also received him back as a type." You see what that's saying? It's saying that Abraham trusted God so much that he knew that if necessary God would raise his son, Isaac, from the dead to fulfill His promises. That's the faith of Abraham. He takes God's word, he believes it despite all the evidence to the contrary. And he believes it so much that he knows that his Father in heaven will raise his son from the dead, if necessary. And then Hebrews 11:19 says and by the way, that is a type of Christ. It points to Jesus Christ who died and who was raised again from the dead by the heavenly Father that we might share in the salvation which He has accomplished for us.

How do we receive that? The same way that Abraham received the promise we believe. Now, I want to pause, and I want to say there may be many people who are gathered here today because of friends and family, who really don't believe the Christmas message. They think it's a little bit crazy. Really, you don't believe that that baby in Bethlehem was God? Really, you don't believe Jesus was divine, that He did all these miracles. That He died and He was literally raised

again from the dead. Surely you don't believe all that? Well, I just remind of you of what Paul says in I Corinthians 1. He said that God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. But those foolish things are the things of salvation.

Yes, as a matter of fact, we do believe that He sent His Son into the world. Yes, as a matter of fact we do believe that the Lord of glory had as His crib an animal's manger. Yes, as a matter of fact, we do believe that He lived perfectly, and He died on our behalf. And yes, as a matter of fact we do believe that if you will trust on Him, you will live with Him forever, here and hereafter. And you say, well, that's just impossible. I say to you again, 4000 years ago God spoke to a man who had no children, and who would not have children until he approached 100, and He said to him, "One day your spiritual descendants will be numberless." Two billion people are worshiping the seed of Abraham. God can be taken at His word. I urge you to take Him at His word today. Let us pray.

Our heavenly Father, we thank You for the truth of Your word. We thank You for the message of the angels, and we sing glory to God in the highest because of the grace You have shown us in Christ. I pray that not one would go away from this place today having trusted in Him, having owned Him, having believed Him, having rested in Him for forgiveness of sins, and I ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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