

## **Romans: David Understood Justification by Faith**

**Romans 4:4-8**

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 4. We've been looking at this great theme of justification for a number of weeks now, especially as we've worked through Romans, chapter 3. Paul there has been explaining justification. Justification simply refers to God's declaring us to be righteous. And he's been explaining in Romans 3 exactly how it is that God goes about declaring us to be righteous. One thing that he has been stressing is that it is not our own righteousness that leads God to declare us to be righteous. It is Christ's righteousness that leads God to declare us to be righteous.

How is it that we then take benefit, how do we gain benefit from Christ's righteousness through faith, through faith alone? Paul says we trust in Christ, and God reckons us to be righteous because of Him. And He's been explaining how that happens in Romans, chapter 3. And we've just been, now for a week, in Romans, chapter 4, and we were in Romans 4, verses 1 through 3, where Paul takes us then to the Old Testament, and especially to Genesis 15, verse 6, and that grand declaration about Abraham: Abraham believed, and it was credited, it was reckoned to him for righteousness. And Paul says, "Look, this teaching that I have been telling you about is not new. It's not something that I invented. It's not novel. It's not unique in the sense of never before having been heard of, though it is unique in other senses. It's a teaching which is actually grounded in the Bible, in the Old Testament Scriptures. In fact, you can find it in the story of one of the greatest saints of Old Testament times. You can find it in the story of the one who is the Father of Israel, the fountainhead of the Jewish people." And he takes us right back to the story of Abraham.

Now why does he do that. Well, we said several things in answer of that question last time. First of all, the Jewish theologians of Paul's day taught that Abraham was chosen by God, elected by God, perhaps even justified by God because of His own righteousness. And believe it or not some of them appeal to this very verse, Genesis, chapter 15, verse 6 in order to prove that. And so Paul wants to challenge that particular belief. He wants to make it clear that when you look at the life and experience of the father of Israel, you find that he was justified by grace thorough faith. And so he wants to make it clear that his teaching is

scriptural. This is, it is rooted in the authoritative Scriptures of God. It's not something he's thought up on his own which contradicts what God taught in the Old Testament. It in fact simply flows from what God taught and revealed in the Old Testament.

There's another thing he wants us to do. He wants us to look closely at Genesis 15, verse 6. And he basically poses this question to us: Where in Genesis 15:6 does it mention Abraham's works? Where in Genesis 15:6 does it mention Abraham's merits? Where in Genesis 15:6 does it suggest that it was because of Abraham's righteousness that God counted him righteous? And of course Paul knows that there's going to be a thunderous silence in response to those questions because Genesis 15:6 speaks of none of those things. Only Abraham's belief, his faith is emphasized by Moses in Genesis 15:6. God counts Abraham as a righteous man because he believed God and His promise.

And Paul wants to focus us in on that important reality of Abraham's faith being the instrument by which God declared him to be righteous. He wants us to know that first of all so that we will know that this teaching of justification by faith is grounded in God's Old Testament scriptures. It's part of the covenant of grace. He wants us to see that Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, so many of whom were arguing with Paul and calling Paul's doctrine of justification false, that the father of the Jewish people was himself justified by faith. And he does so, of course, ultimately so that we might have greater confidence and greater understanding of this truth of justification.

Now he continues that argument today. As we look at Romans, chapter 4, verses 4 through 8, Paul zeroes in on this idea of imputation. I realize that imputation is not a word we use every day over our coffee. Just like justification. Normally we don't work justification into a regular conversation. We have to go to Paul in Romans or elsewhere usually before we're talking about justification in the course of conversation. Just as *justification* was a term borrowed from the law courts, so also *imputation* was a term borrowed from the accountant's office.

Paul goes to these two terms, not only to describe for us what it is like to be saved, but to show to us exactly what God does for us when He saves us. He justifies us, and then He imputes to us Christ's righteousness. Paul is focusing our attention on imputation, this accounting term. He elaborates on this point by reminding us of something that David said in the Psalms. In fact, in Psalm 32, verses 1 and 2. So let's hear God's word reverently and attentively in Romans 4:

Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned 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 reckoned as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man upon whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the

man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy word. May He open our eyes to see and embrace its truth. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, this day for those who do not know Christ enable them through the eyes of faith to see the truth of your free gospel offer. We pray for those who know Christ and yet struggle, sometimes not sensing the full acceptance that they have in Jesus Christ. Root their assurance in this glorious truth that they might walk freely. Be encouraged and be strong in their testimony. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

The issue of justification, the issue of imputation is not just interesting theological chitchat for seminarians. The issue of justification, the issue of imputation is at the heart of the Christian faith. There are very few questions in life that you can ask more significant than the question what makes a person right before God? What is it that causes God to accept a person, to embrace a person? What can cause you to be able to stand with confidence before the judgment of God? Those kinds of questions are significant, and there are very few questions more significant than those. Paul is addressing precisely that significant a question in the passage before us today. And, in fact, is elaborating on a point which he had already raised in Romans 4, verses 1 through 3. In Romans 4, verses 1 through 3, because he quoted Genesis 15:6, he had raised this picture, this term, this metaphor of reckoning or accounting or imputing by reminding us that Abraham believed, and it was reckoned or counted or imputed to him as righteousness.

And so in verses 4 through 8 he wants to elaborate on just what imputation is, and what its implications are. And that's all we're going to do today is look at those two things. In verses 4 and 5 Paul explains imputation. In verses 6 through 8 he demonstrates imputation. Just as he had gone to the story of Abraham to show that His doctrine of justification by faith was biblical and was part of the very heart of the Old Testament teaching on salvation, then in verses 6 through 8 he goes to David, and he says, "Not only was Abraham justified by faith, but David was justified by faith." And in the process he explains to us imputation, and he helps us understand the implications of that glorious truth of imputation. So let's look at these passages together.

### **I. As we trust in Christ, God credits, imputes, Christ's righteousness to us.**

First in verses 4 through 5, here he explains imputation as we trust in Christ, God, by His favor, credits Christ's righteousness to us. That's what imputation means. As we trust in Christ, God credits to our account the righteousness of Christ and conversely credits our sin to Christ's account. That's what imputation means. And Paul here is explaining how imputation works. He makes it clear in verses 4 and 5 that Abraham was declared righteous, and he was accepted by

grace as a favor, as a grant, as a gift from God, according to his faith, not according to his works. And understanding imputation, Paul says, will help you understand and appreciate all the more that Abraham was accepted by grace. The argument here is that God's imputation of righteousness is inconsistent with your earning your standing as righteous.

In other words, imputation is incompatible with an earned salvation. Merit and what is due because of what you have done, those things don't mesh with being reckoned righteous, by grace, being imputed righteousness by God's favor. Paul gives a negative illustration. In verse 4 he says look, "A laborer receives earned wages. It is the laborer's legal and moral right to receive those wages. And to put it the other way around, it is the employer's legal and moral responsibility and obligation to pay him his due for the work that he has done." And Paul says, "That is not how it is in God's justification."

Now it's very important for us to pause here and reflect because so often when we talk with people about salvation, the first way that they want to think about their relationship with God is in terms of compensation. I'm trying to live a good life. How often have you heard that? What's your relationship with God? Well, I'm trying to live a good life. The category of compensation immediately comes up. And the apostle Paul is saying here that that is not the way it is in justification. To reckon or to credit or to impute righteousness, that is what God does in justification. He doesn't look at you and say, "Okay, you're righteous, I'm going to declare you righteous." He grants to us, by His grace, that we are credited as, accepted as, accounted as righteous for the sake of His son by faith. So he goes to this metaphor from accountancy. Just like justification is drawn from the law courts where the judge declares a criminal to be guilty and declares a person who has been shown to be innocent by the court to be acquitted, so also in this metaphor from accountancy, Paul says God imputes righteousness. He assigns that to your account. It's moved from one column to another. From one ledger sheet to another. And so in contrast to the Jews who argued that God justified Abram, that he chose Abraham because of his righteousness, Paul says, "Oh, no, if you look at the Old Testament, it's clear that God imputed righteousness. He credited Abraham with righteousness because of his faith." And so Paul explains imputation by saying that God, through His sheer favor and gift and grant declared Abraham righteous according to his faith alone apart from works.

What's so significant about that? Paul is saying if we are thinking in terms of earned salvation, then we are thinking in the wrong categories. For Paul, salvation is by grace, not by compensation. And because salvation is by grace and not by compensation, we thus receive it by faith rather than earn it by works. Salvation is by grace, not by compensation, and, therefore, we receive it by faith. We don't earn it by works. And Paul is explaining imputation to us so that we will understand precisely that truth. There is a temptation in every person with a religious inkling, who is unclear about what Jesus has declared in His word, and what His apostles teach in the word, there is an inkling, there is an instinct, there

is a tendency in every person to seek acceptance by God via what we do. I'm trying to be a good person. I try to keep the Commandments. I try and be charitable to other people, perhaps we've heard someone say. And the apostle Paul says, "You need to understand, that when it comes to acceptance by God, this is a matter of grace and faith, not compensation and works."

## **II. God imputed righteousness to Old Testament believers.**

In fact, Paul goes on to elaborate that precise point in verses 6 through 8. He's explained imputation in verses 4 and 5, God credits righteousness to our account, and He demonstrates it from the Old Testament in verses 6 through 8. Paul turns our attention to Psalm 32, verses 1 and 2, and he says, "David himself, in that passage, speaks of our lawless deeds being forgiven, covered and not imputed, or not reckoned." In other words, why does Paul turn in Romans 4:6 through 8 to Psalm 32:1 and 2. He turns there so that we will know that David understood justification by faith, that David believed justification by faith. That David taught justification by faith. Paul is saying that not only did Abraham understand, believe and embrace justification by faith, but so also David understood, believed and taught that justification is by grace alone, and it is received through faith alone. Paul, in order to confirm his teaching, goes again to the Old Testament. Just like in verse 2 and 3 he turned our attention to Genesis 15:6, now he turns our attention to Psalm 32. And not only does he go to the Psalms, he goes to David himself. So we have these two towering figures of the Old Testament. What better way to appeal to the Jewish Christians in the audience that he was not asking them to turn their back on the Old Testament scriptures. He was saying, "No, friends, you embrace what those Scriptures say." Those Scriptures have for you set forth the salvation, the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. And he goes right to Psalm 32 and he is saying, "Look, what is true about Abraham, is also true about David. He, too, knew that justification is by faith alone." And he says, "David recognized that the forgiven man, the accepted man, the man to whom his own sins had not been reckoned is a blessed man." Now that's very significant. David doesn't call him a deserving man, deserving is the man. Blessed is the man. Due to God's divine benediction grant and favor, your lawless deeds are covered and forgiven and not imputed. And Paul goes right to that passage. Look at the end of verse 8. "Blessed is the man who sinned. The Lord will not take into account." Paul goes to that passage because of its use of that phrase, "take into account," it's the same term that is used in Genesis 15:6. Just as God says in His word in Genesis 15:6 that He reckoned Abram as righteous, so also in Psalm 32 David says, "That the man who is blessed is not reckoned his sin." God does not reckon his sin. He does not take his sin into account. And the passage here, you see, focuses us on what we might call non-imputation. God does not impute our sins to us. He does not charge them to our account. In other words, David is rejoicing that his sin was not imputed, not reckoned to his account.

Now this is absolutely important to understand. Whereas our tendency, when we begin to talk about spiritual things, if we don't have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ our tendency is to say, "Well, I'm trying to be a good person." "I'm trying to keep the Ten Commandments, and I'm trying to be a charitable person, and I'm trying to do deeds of mercy." Notice that David says the blessed man is the man whom the Lord does not consider his works. The blessed man is the man that God accepts not on the basis of what he is, but on the basis of something else. In other words, far from standing before God and saying, "Lord, I'm trying to be a good person." David says, "The man who is really blessed is the man whom God doesn't consider that about." He considers something else about him. That he has trusted, he has placed his faith, he has believed on God and his promise as revealed in Jesus Christ. And as such is considered to be a righteous man.

This non-imputation points us to the three great imputations of Scripture. When we get there in a few weeks, in Romans, chapter 5, verse 12, we will learn of the first and the sad imputation. The imputation of Adam's sin to us. It is a great mystery. It is one of the most unpopular teachings in all the Bible. But it is inescapably biblical and Pauline that all of us have sinned in Adam, that we bear the responsibility for the original fall of Adam. Now that's mind boggling, but Paul speaks about it in Romans 5:12 and following. That's the first great imputation. The second two great imputations of Scripture are happy, however. And Paul begins to speak of them in Romans 5 as well, even as he is speaking of them now. That is, the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to us, to those who believe in Him and the imputation of our sins to Him. David doesn't tell you in Psalm 32, verses 1 and 2 how it is that God could be righteous and not impute your sin to you. Paul does tell you how it is that God could be righteous and not impute your sin to you. He said it happens this way: Jesus dies for you. As your sins are imputed to Him, His righteousness conversely is imputed to you as you trust in Him. So that you are declared to be righteous in Him, and He is declared to be a sinner for you, and He receives in His own body on the tree your due penalty for sin. So that as you trust in Him, you go free.

Now the apostle is saying, "That's what I'm telling you, friends." Far from trusting in our works to gain us God's favor, we should rejoice that by faith He doesn't count our works against us. You see our tendency is immediately to think of those few good things that we have done and hope they will commend us before God. And David says, "O Lord, I rejoice that You've forgotten the things that I have done, and You have not credited them to my account. You've not imputed my sins to me. You've not reckoned them against my accounting. But you have declared me to be righteous out of Your free mercy and favor." Just as Paul could say to Philemon that if Onesimus has in any way wronged you or hurt you, in Philemon, verse 18, charge that to my account. So also Jesus Christ has said, "If that sinner in any way has offended you, charge that to My account." Paul says, that is what God does in justification. He charges your sin to Christ's account, and grants Christ's righteousness to your account, by His divine favor

as you trust in Him.

Now let me just say there may be someone here today who has grown up in the church, been a member of the church all your life, and yet ultimately you think that the reason you ought to be accepted by God is because you are a nice person. After all, you're a Christian. You were born in Mississippi, haven't murdered anybody, haven't done anything really terrible, at least in your own eyes. Sure God should accept me. I've tried to be good. The apostle says here, for anyone who is trusting in himself that way, because that's exactly what you're doing, you're not trusting in Christ, you're trusting in yourself. You're not the blessed man. The blessed man is the man who is long past thinking that he can commend Himself to God because of what he's done. The blessed man is the man whom God looks over the things that he has done, and looks to something deeper and greater, what Christ has done.

Or perhaps you're a person who thinks, you know, this Christian God, this God of the Bible, this God is mean. He's waiting to pounce on me. He is waiting to blast me into oblivion. How can you ask me, preacher, to love a God like that? And the apostle is saying here, "Let me tell you about my God. So willing, so ready was He to embrace you, to declare you to be righteous, though you are not. That He caused your sin to be imputed to His own Son that He might embrace you as a son, as a daughter." That's the kind of God that's set forth in the gospel. There's no God like Him in the world. All the other gods are fabrications of men's minds. This God is far beyond. Can you imagine Adam in the garden saying, "Lord, why don't you give Your Son?" And that's precisely what God does. He gives His Son.

And then to you, Christian. Who may, as you've been going on in the Christian life, have begun to think in terms of God's favor towards you, that God's acceptance towards you is based somehow upon you being good enough that particular day. Don't you need to be reminded that if your acceptance is based upon anything in you ever, you'll never know the freedom which God has granted by the Spirit. Because you know, if you think about it long enough, that there's nothing in us that we have not corrupted by sin. And that the way to peace of mind and assurance of salvation is the recognition that our acceptance of God is not based upon an innate righteousness, but on an alien righteousness that has been credited to our account, imputed to us by divine grace. Christ's righteousness, which is my own by faith, so that I have peace with God. That's a gospel worth sharing, a faith to live by. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we pray that as we contemplate these words in their simplicity that you would enable them to become real by faith to us. That none would go from this place without belief, without assurance because they've trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation as He set forth in the gospel. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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