
“Counted Righteous”

ROMANS 4:1-8

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BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

Blessed is the man who is counted righteous by God by faith in His Son and whose sin will never, ever be counted against him! Listen, watch, or read as we explore Paul’s incredible, almost unbelievable words to the church in Romans 4:1-8.

FROG IN THE MILK

One of the commentators (R. Kent Hughes) began his chapter on this passage with a folktale of a frog that fell into a pail of milk. The frog tried and tried to escape but the sides were too slick, and he had nothing from which to leap. He paddled and paddled and voila his paddling churned the milk into butter and from there he was able to leap to safety.

This is the modern philosophy, just keep working and working and doing good and avoiding bad, and with enough effort you’ll make it.

It’s actually harder than I think it should be to convince someone that they need God’s grace. When you’ve received it, you realize how utterly hopeless you were without it. But, before you receive it, before you trusted in Jesus for your righteousness, you actually think you don’t need it. You imagine that your life amounts to enough good works that you can stand before God and get into Heaven.

Nonsense, cries Paul! All the self-help and nice try’s in the world isn’t going to change your eternal destiny. The frog’s problem in the story is external – its trapped in a pail. The solution was internal – keep trying until you work your way out.

But the Gospel makes it clear, our problem is not external, it’s internal. We’re dead inside. Our hearts are broken and wicked. Thus, the solution can’t come from within. The solution to our problem must be external. And if it is external, it can only be received, never achieved.

I think that was true in Paul’s experience, too. Thus he calls two witnesses the Jews wouldn’t dare discount – Abraham and King David.

ROMANS 4:1-8

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” ⁴Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

Our forefather in verse 1 refers to that of Jews, including Paul. He acknowledges that the connection to Abraham is theirs **according to the flesh**. Physically, he, along with all Jews by birth, were descended from Abraham.

Because they were offspring of Abraham they believed they were guaranteed admission into Heaven. But *“not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’” Romans 9:7* There’s a difference between being offspring of Abraham, and being a child of Abraham.

WHAT WAS GAINED?

Paul asks **what...was gained by Abraham?** What spiritual advantage or what privilege did Abraham have that he can pass on to his descendants? In other words what is the inheritance?

² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. Paul goes back to his question from Romans 3:27, “what becomes of our boasting?” If **Abraham was justified by works**, meaning if he had achieved right standing by something he had done, then there would be room for him to boast. If he did something good, he could claim credit for it. **But not before God.**

He might have room to boast before men, but even if he could, that boasting would still not arise to God. In **verse 3** Paul uses Genesis 15:6 to prove his point, **For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”**

In Genesis 15, Abraham, then called Abram, was concerned that a member of his household, not his own child, would be his heir. God said to Abram, *“This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be. And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” Genesis 15:4-6*

A SURVEY OF ABRAHAM’S FAITH

Let’s quickly survey the context of Abraham’s faith:

In Genesis 12 God calls Abram to follow Him and promises to make him a great nation, and bless him, and make his name great. He was 75 years old.

In Genesis 13 God promises again to make his offspring like the dust of the earth so that if you can count the dust of the earth, his offspring can be counted.

By Genesis 16 Abram and his wife, Sarai, take things into their own hands out of frustration that they still did not have offspring. Ishmael is born when Abram is 86.

Finally in Genesis 17, when Abram was 99 years old, the Lord promised that next year, Sarai would bear him a son. He promised that Abram would be the father of a multitude of nations and changed his name to Abraham and Sarai’s to Sarah. There He established the everlasting covenant with Abraham and his offspring, and put in place circumcision as a symbol of this covenant.

It was in the middle of all that that Abraham is said to have been counted righteous. Still childless, still experiencing frustration, still waiting for God to move. And it would still be years before God delivered on His promise.

Nevertheless, when God showed him the stars of the sky and said that’s what your family is going to look like, Abraham believed God. He believed that God would do what He said He would do. He believed that God would cause his offspring to be a blessing to the nations. He had faith. And God counted it to him as righteousness.

The word translated **counted** appears 11 times in this chapter. It carries the idea of crediting to one's account. It can be translated as counted, reckoned, considered, imputed. It means that righteousness is credited to someone's spiritual account based on faith, not works.

WE WORK FOR WAGES, NOT GIFTS

Verse 4 continues, **Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.** If Abraham had earned his righteousness, it would not be considered a **gift**. When a person works for something, justice demands remission of payment. It would be **due** him. God owes anyone who works their way to righteousness because God is a just God. But Abraham didn't earn righteousness, nor does anyone. He simply believed God and God gave him the gift of grace.

Verse 5 says, **And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,** Paul is getting to the core of the Jewish identity. There is One God who will be king over all the earth – Jews and Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised. There is One way to be made right with God – faith.

So he is like, "Let me prove it by going to the father of Israel, Abraham." He lays out how Abraham believed God and was declared to be right with Him – justified – *before* he was circumcised. It was simply based on his belief that God would do what He promised to do. Paul later characterizes Abraham's faith as being "*fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.*" *Romans 4:21*

Paul is like, "Abraham, the man who you claim as forefather, our great ancestor, was a man of faith before he *did* anything." No doubt, he acted on his faith. Just as James asserts, "*Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;*" *James 2:21-22*

COUNTED RIGHTEOUS BEFORE HE ACTED

But, righteousness was counted to him BEFORE he did anything. His **faith is counted as righteousness**. Let's camp out here for a moment because like I just read, James says that Abraham's faith was accompanied by works. James refers to what Abraham did in Genesis 22, years after Genesis 15, when Abraham was counted righteous.

God knows the moment we truly believe. He knows when we come to faith. He knows because He's responsible. The Holy Spirit regenerates our dead hearts and we believe. But you may not know. Or others may not know. So the Lord gives you opportunity to demonstrate your faith.

James is saying, "You say you believe, what does your life say?" You claim to have faith, but there is no change in your life from when you were dead in sin. That's dead faith.

Paul is saying that no amount of life change is going to make you righteous. You get that the moment you believe. Paul is talking about the possession of saving faith. James is talking about the demonstration of saving faith. Different audiences, different needs, different contexts.

Paul will address a changed life that flows from a saving faith later in Romans. We'll get there. But I want to make sure we're clear – Paul appeals to Abraham circa Genesis 15, before he did anything God counted him righteous because of his faith. In Genesis 22, Abraham proved to himself and to the whole world that his faith was real and that is James' point.

A SCANDALOUS PARADOX

Now I want to point out this scandalous phrase. Listen the paradox Paul sets before us: **Him who justifies the ungodly.** The righteous judge declares ungodly sinners righteous.

The Old Testament repeatedly denounces this kind of judgment. *“He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord.” Proverbs 17:15* God sets Himself as an example of righteous judgment, saying in *Exodus 23:7*, *“...I will not acquit the wicked.”*

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament it can be rendered, “I will not justify the ungodly.” What God forbids in the Old Testament, Paul teaches God does Himself! This would have seemed outrageous to Paul’s Jewish audience. This might even hurt our sensibilities today. We imagine that God gives good to those who do good. If you do your best, God will do the rest. But, acquitting the ungodly? Really?!

This is a wonderful thing. Like wonder-full. Full of wonder. If we fail to wonder at this, it is because we have failed to fully grasp the sinfulness of sin. The wrongfulness of sin. The nastiness of sin. We have failed to see how serious sin really is.

How is this paradox resolved? How is it that God, the just judge who decried the justification of the ungodly? The answer is found in *Romans 5:6* *“Christ died for the ungodly”*

This may be old-hat to some of you, but this was scandalous and too-good-to-be-true to his original audience. So, Paul goes to another icon of the faith, the beloved king of Israel, King David in Psalm 32.

CALLING KING DAVID TO THE WITNESS STAND

Verses 6-8 say, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

David was a man after God’s own heart. In verse 5 David sings, *“I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not cover my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” Psalm 32:5*

David knew and believed that God was willing to forgive sin when we simply confessed. He didn’t have to make up for it. There isn’t even any mention of a sacrifice.

David had deliberately broken three of the ten commandments – coveting, adultery, and murder. There was no Old Testament system of sacrifices for such blatant sin. King David was hopeless. All he could do is cast himself on the mercy of the Lord.

“For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Psalm 51:16-17

BLESSED INDEED

Yet, Paul calls him **blessed**, twice! David called himself blessed twice. Why? Because when we realize that all we have to offer God is the very sin for which we should be damned, and when we realize that no work on our part can atone for our sin, we are saved *sola fida!* By faith alone we are counted righteous.

Blessed, happy, fulfilled, joyful **is the one whose lawless deeds are forgiven.** Sin is lawlessness, 1 John 3 says, *“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.” 1 John 3:4* We should never downplay our sin. We should never forget that sin is lawlessness and a rejection of the Creator.

Man, who is mere dust of the earth, dares violate the decrees of the infinitely holy God. And we’re fortunate that He does not pour out His justified wrath on us in the moment of sin. Remember how blessed you really are when instead of being squashed like a bug, you have your sins forgiven. Your debt erased. Your **sins covered**.

Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count sin.

By linking this Psalm with what he is saying in Romans 4, Paul is telling us that when God counts us righteous, he simultaneously decides to never count our sin against us again.

Without any works on our part, without any effort, any good deeds, we are counted righteous, and our sins are not counted against us.

Blessed is the man who is counted righteous by God and whose sins the Lord will not count against him. Amen! We are blessed indeed.

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