

Romans 4:1-8

Imagine with me a **young boy**, a 15 year old, an **orphan**. Nobody ever wanted him for long. Passed around from foster home to foster home.

At the high school where he attends, **he keeps mostly to himself**. His personal **hygiene** leaves a **lot to be desired**. Even the **teachers** have pretty much **given up** trying to get him out of his shell.

But imagine a **classmate**, another boy around his age, **starts to befriend him**. This other boy doesn't need more friends—he's got plenty. He's one of the most popular kids at school. He's the **all-star slugger** on the **school's baseball team**. As a matter of fact, **his dad is the coach**.

But this other boy, the all-star, starts to sit with the orphan at lunchtimes. Starts to ask him questions about his life, his interests, his hobbies. Before too long they're shooting hoops together, doing home work together, playing video games occasionally (you don't become an all-star *anything* if you don't limit video games to *occasionally!*)—and actually, if you watched these two boys, you'd discover that more and more of their time is spent **on the baseball diamond**, with nobody else around--and the school's all-star athlete is **teaching his friend**, the orphan, *how to play baseball*--which is something he'd always longed to do.

But one day, **the most tragic thing you could imagine happens**. Our 15-year old orphan, who's been having a terrible time at his foster home, starts going down a bad path. He starts going off with some of his so-called buddies from the block, during school hours. He starts drinking. He **starts street-racing**. And somehow, he doesn't even remember how, he ends up **behind the wheel of a car one night**, speeding **right past the school, racing** his car down the quiet street-- like Andrews Ave right outside. And **out into the street**, coming out of the school in front of his dad after a

long day of baseball practice, **unaware of the car careening** toward him, **steps the orphan's friend**—right **into the car's path**. And the orphan's friend is killed on impact.

Imagine several months later, **a visitor** comes to see the orphan, sitting in the detention facility. And **it's his high school's baseball coach**—the father of his friend. And this man looks at this orphan and he says

—**“I want you to come home with me**. I want to adopt you as my son. It's all worked out with the courts, you're **free to come home** now. **Follow me.**”

If our orphan actually believes that this is true – and if as incredible as it sounds, he has indeed just been offered **not just forgiveness** but **a family, a father** – by the very man who had every reason in the world to *hate* him ... and if this orphan, in humility and astonishment, gets up and follows his new dad into a life he can't even really imagine yet, but he knows that this is **like resurrection from the grave**, this is **being given a new destiny**, a new **identity**, a new **family**, a new **life**...

Then there are **two things that will be true for this young man**, no doubt about it:

1. He will know he's **done nothing to earn** his father's love—so he'll be humble.
2. He will know **nothing he's done can forfeit** this kind of father's love—so he'll be happy.

I don't know if something exactly like this has ever happened in real life.

But I can tell you what: this book tells us that **something *better* than this has happened in real life.** God offers **forgiveness** and **restoration** and **adoption as beloved sons** to people whose evil and rebellion against God deserved his judgment. And instead, it was *his* Son who received God's judgment in our place. **Our sins killed God's son. Our sins killed God's son.**

And God invites you to come to his Son, risen from the dead, and to receive not just forgiveness from God but **a new life, a new family, a new existence as a child of God.**

If you have faith in Jesus, then two things ought to be true of you:

1. You should know that nothing you've done earned God's love—which should make you humble.
2. You should know that nothing you've done or ever might do can forfeit God's love—which should make you happy.

Now that first point, that we don't *earn* salvation, we receive it, and therefore we should be humble--is what Paul has been saying in the last few verses of Romans. As we heard last week from Romans 3:27—“**Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded....**”

No Christian ought to think “I've basically been pretty good, that's why God loves me.”

And at the same time—the flipside of that truth—is that

no Christian ought to think “If I'm **not** good enough today, or tomorrow, then God will stop loving me.”

→ And yet many Christians struggle. We struggle with applying this doctrine of “justification by faith.” We can **tend toward self-righteousness**, where we think God loves us because of how good we’ve done--where we truly think God kind of owes us because of how hard we’ve worked at being good people,

→ **or** we can tend **toward anxiety and insecurity**, because we actually think that God’s love for us depends on how good we’ve done--and we haven’t done very well lately!

And so this passage today is for you—whether you’ve received God’s forgiveness through faith in Jesus long ago or whether you’re just hearing that he offers it for the first time today.

Whoever you are, and however “good” of a Christian you’ve been—you cannot take credit for *earning* any of God’s love, and you don’t need to **do** anything to *keep* God’s love.

What today’s passage shows us is the good news that even the **“best believers”** in history were **not loved by God because of their righteousness. They were considered righteous because they believed in and received God’s offer of love.** That’s Paul’s point in today’s passage.

Let’s read:

[1] What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? [2] For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. [3] For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” [4] Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. [5] And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

[6] just 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; [8] blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” (Romans 4:1-8 ESV)

Now, Paul’s made a good case in Romans that all people are sinners who have **earned punishment from God**—But now he’s started saying that Jews AND Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ are **loved** by God, **justified** by that faith, even though they haven’t kept the law of God.

And that would’ve been a hard pill for many Jews to swallow--because they *knew* keeping God’s laws was important! They had a feeling that they were *better in God’s eyes* than gentiles because *they were pretty good at keeping God’s laws*.

So Paul backs up his teaching by appealing to two of the Jews’ own heroes:

Abraham – their “forefather according to the flesh”—the “founding” father of Judaism...

And

David – their most famous king, the most righteous king they ever had, a man after God’s own heart.

And what Paul wants to show is that these two men, just like everybody else—**were justified only by faith.**

Even **Abraham, the first Jew**, and **David, the best Jew**—were beloved and blessed by the God of heaven and earth—not because God **believed they were good**, but because they **believed God was good.**

Paul starts with Abraham.

The Jewish teachers of Paul's day were emphatic that Abraham was the model Jew. He was blessed, accepted by God **because he did what was right**—and what they taught was that *if you'll be like Abraham and live a good life, **God will bless you too!***

And Paul says, v. 2 – if that's true, then what I just said in 3:27 **about boasting being excluded** isn't true, at least not for Abraham. If Abraham was blessed and **declared righteous because he WAS righteous**—if he was “justified by works”—then he does have something to boast about.

→ Every other religion on the planet basically says that you will be welcomed by God if you're good enough. In other words, at the end of the day you can pat yourself on the back for “saving yourself.”

Paul says—if Abraham was accepted by God because he had met God's standard of goodness, then he should **pat himself on the back**.

But Paul **right away says**— “**but not before God!**” In other words, “yeah, but it isn't true. In God's eyes Abraham wasn't justified by works, which means he has **nothing to boast about**.

“How can Paul say that so confidently? Just dismiss the teachings of his day?? Claim that Abraham wasn't a good man somehow??”

Well, in v. 3, Paul points out—it's not so complicated—**just read your Bible!** “For what does the **Scripture** say? *Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.*”

Paul's quoting from Gen 15:6...and if we had more time we would go back and get the context of how God is promising to GIVE more descendants than can be counted to Abraham—who's an old, old man married to an old, old woman, with no kids. To **bless him and his family beyond belief, to be their**

God, their protector, their provider—and through Abraham’s offspring to bless people from all nations. In other words, God’s offering Abraham things Abraham could never accomplish on his own.

And *what does Genesis 15 say about **why** God considers Abraham worthy of such blessings?* Well, you could look at the context, look at it in the Hebrew, look at it in the Greek, and you know what you’ll discover? Genesis 15:6 means what Genesis 15:6 says!

“It doesn’t say “Abraham *obeyed* God and so God called him righteous...”

*Abraham **believed** God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.*

Now, let’s just pause here to **think** about what this verse is saying.

Paul clearly is not just saying that Abraham’s faith was considered **a righteous thing**. It *was* **right** for him to believe God, but that’s not the point of the verse!

It’s not like somehow believing on Abraham’s part was SO righteous that it just totally made up for all his sins and all his wickedness – just, cancelled it all out somehow. It’s not “Abraham believed God and God was pretty impressed! Sure, Abraham was a liar and had multiple women and all that-- but he also believed in God, you know, he was a religious person, and that’s really all God cares about when he goes about declaring who’s righteous and who’s not”

No...Paul’s whole concern in chapter 3 has been to show that there’s a way for people to be **declared, considered, and truly-blessed** by God as being **TOTALLY righteous. TOTALLY good**. What is being “counted” to Abraham, credited to him, written down on his account, established as his actual status before the holy God is not “some bad sins but also some good

faith.” No—what’s being *credited* to Abraham is this: **“This man is totally righteous in God’s eyes.”**

So we come back to this question--

When God puts down to Abraham’s credit “totally righteous in my eyes,” is that because Abraham **HAD** been righteous?

Because if it was, then not only would Abraham have something to be proud of, but he wouldn’t have really had anything to thank God for, because God would’ve OWED him.

Look at v. 4: *Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.*

When someone *works*, DOES SOMETHING, that deserves a reward, then when someone gives them payment—**that’s not a gift**. You could say “thank you” to be polite but you don’t even really have to.

→Nobody gets home on Friday after working hard all week and says “honey, do we have any thank you cards?? You’ll never believe it—the boss gave me a paycheck today!!” No...if you work and you get wages that’s because you ***deserve*** to be paid. The boss isn’t doing you a favor! Maybe you actually deserve a *raise*!

But that’s not what was going on with Abraham. Abraham had no claim on God’s approval, on God’s blessing **AT ALL**. God **did not** credit “righteousness” to Abraham because his faith was such a spiritually righteous thing, and God **did not** credit “righteousness” to Abraham because he **had lived righteously. He hadn’t!**

Paul describes Abraham here in v. 5, actually as “**the one who does not work.**” In other words, “Abraham had not earned God’s blessing by his works.” Do you see how Paul describes Abraham? “**Ungodly.**”

When God puts down to Abraham’s credit “**beloved in my eyes,**” it’s not *payment*, it’s a gift. Because Abraham *wasn’t* righteous—he was ungodly!!

So “faith” in and of itself isn’t some glorious credit to us. The power of faith is **who the faith is in:** v. 5 again: “... to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, HIS faith is counted as righteousness...”

→ See it’s not enough to have faith in *a* God. It’s not enough to have spirituality. Your faith needs to be in *this* God—this God who has revealed himself in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Abraham’s righteousness comes from *something GOD does*. And it’s what *God does* that makes a person right in his eyes. The **justification** is not something we ‘do.’ It’s something God does. It’s a gift God gives.

FAITH is merely the receiving of that gift from God.

→ That’s why everybody is invited to come to God, no matter how messed up you are. Faith does not *earn* God’s forgiveness. **Faith takes hold of God’s offer of forgiveness.**

God says “**Will you come to Jesus, who died for your sins and rose to life proving that his death in your place was sufficient, and will you receive my free forgiveness and adoption and blessing?**”
And faith says “**YES!**”

→If you believe in God, that's nice. But do you believe in *this* God? This God who offers himself to you not as a rubber stamper of your hopes and dreams but as the God who came in the person of Jesus Christ to **die for you** so that you **could live with him**? So that you could *live for him, in gratitude and worship*? Do you believe in God as the Savior who wants to rescue you and forgive you and bless you and make you his own, and teach you to live for him?

→If you believe in Jesus but you don't want to **follow** him, **be** with him, **listen** to him, then I am afraid you only believe *things about* Jesus... But if you will believe ***in*** Jesus as *who he offers himself to be for you*, **then you will be blessed.**

That blessing—which God promised freely to Abraham—is what David talks about in Psalm 32—which Paul brings up next: vv. 6-8:

*“just 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; [8] blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.’”*

Paul says that this quote from David is about God *justifying, counting as righteous* people who don't deserve it. But David's quote actually uses the broader, richer category of God's **blessing**—*enjoying the full favor and love of God*. Justification is just a *part* of that!

The *blessed* person in the Bible is the person who has deep, deep reason to be happy: because God is happy with that person!

And Paul says that David's talking about the person who enjoys the full favor and love of God is someone who is "counted righteous **apart from what their deeds have earned.**

David here is focusing on **something that's part of justification**, namely, **forgiveness**. Because to be declared righteous when you've sinned, when you've actually been *un*righteous, means God's going to have to forgive, cover over, forget about, not take into account—**your unrighteousness, your ungodliness**.

Paul's point is that **David himself, "the best Jewish King ever,"** taught that those who are **blessed** by God—who can be happy because God is happy with them--are **blessed** not because they had lived better than everybody else in God's eyes, but **DESPITE** the fact that they've done wrong in God's eyes, **he has forgiven them.**

- ➔ Have you sinned terribly against someone in your life? If they have not forgiven you, you know the weight, and the pain of it. If they *have* forgiven you...you could never do anything to make it right but they welcome you back and keep loving you anyway—you know what a blessing that is.
- ➔ But David is saying—and he knows, he committed horrific sins—that the person who enjoys the favor of God is **not the person who's been GOOD before God, but the person who's been FORGIVEN by God.**

This is what God does for anyone and everyone who believes in God who justifies the ungodly. He considers them *good* and treats them that way.

To paraphrase David, “Blessed is the one whose murder, anger, theft, adultery, cowardice, lies, lust, self-centeredness, apathy, and laziness-- the Lord does not hold against them.”

Who are those people?? WHOEVER will **take Jesus as he offers himself**: as the **savior** and **king for sinners**. Even you, any one of you, who believes in Jesus.

In fact, as we’ve seen in Romans and will again—the faith that connects us to Jesus connects us to the one whose righteousness is credited to our account. If you believe *in Christ*, God counts CHRIST’s righteousness to your account.

That means the greatest saint—Abraham, Paul, etc., has no greater standing than you, weak believer. Because **CHRIST is your righteousness**.

So many implications, but let’s just bring it back to where we started...

Imagine with me a 16-year old boy, playing on his school’s baseball team. He’s up to bat again and he’s terrified. Not because he’s afraid of the ball--But because he’s afraid of his dad. The second pitch comes and he freezes. Strike two. He cringes, and then from the stands comes just what he feared— “What’s the matter with you? Swing the bat, stupid!”

When that boy swings at the next pitch, hoping beyond hope that he’ll hit the ball, he’s not free to improve. He’s not free to enjoy the game. What is he trying to do?

He’s trying to earn his dad’s love.

→Christian, that is **not what your life as a child of God needs to feel like.**

You do not swing the bat, you do not fight temptation, you do not confess sin,

you do not evangelize, you do not come to church, or say your prayers, or serve your neighbors—because you’re trying to earn your dad’s love.

Imagine with me the next boy up to bat—a 16-year old boy. He **used to be an orphan**, but **now he’s a Son**. In fact, his dad happens to be the coach... The second pitch comes and he doesn’t swing. **Strike two**. Do you know what, though? *This* boy turns to face the next pitch—with all his might, with a smile on his face, without fear of striking out, even though he’s struck out before, many times.

He doesn’t swing that way because he wants to be an all-star. He doesn’t swing that way to impress the other teammates or the fans. He doesn’t swing for bragging rights. Do you know why he swings that way?

Because after the second pitch, he turned and looked toward the dugout—and he heard the words he’s come to treasure and depend upon with all his heart: **“It’s alright, son, just give it your best! I love you!”**

...

1. Nothing you’ve done earned God’s love—so be humble.
2. Nothing you do or fail to do can *unearn* God’s love—so be happy!

Christian, we have reason to be the **humblest** and the **happiest** people on the planet. You who believe in Jesus—your life is **not** about **trying to earn God’s favor**. The fact that your trust is in Christ is proof that **God has loved you more than your works could ever earn**.

→Don’t swing the bat—don’t fight temptation, confess sin, evangelize, come to church, pray, serve—don’t do those things because you’re trying to earn your dad’s love.

Do them because HE HAS LOVED YOU INTO HIS FAMILY already, and nothing you could ever do will change that. All that's left for you to do is **to learn how to live like his child**—in humble gratitude and in grateful joy.

²⁰Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Hebrews 13:20-21 ESV