

When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

"Precious & Accounted For"

4:1-15

As Paul and Silas sang praise songs in the Philippian jail an earthquake rocked the place. The cell doors sprang open. The keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here." Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. He brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Paul and Silas said there was only one thing he could do:

Acts 16:31 "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved..."

They did not tell him to become more **righteous**; they did not tell him to perform a **ritual**; they did not tell him to keep a set of **rules**. They told him to simply believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Faith" and "believe" are used fifteen times in Romans chapter four. It is the Bible's great chapter on salvation by grace through believing alone, apart from your behavior. It is, in many ways, the Bible's great chapter.

Jews listening to Paul's message would wonder how it squared with the Scriptures. Paul turned his attention to Abraham, the "father" of the Jews.

Romans 4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?

Abraham is the "father" of the Jewish people - the first Jew, called to be separate from the world by God to be head of a new nation that God would bless. Looking back at him, Paul asks us "What did Abraham accomplish in himself by which he was saved?" In other words, "Was it his own works of righteousness that changed his standing before God and made him savable?" If it was, then,

Romans 4:2 ... if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

Justification is the act of God by which He declares a believing sinner righteous on the basis of Jesus Christ's finished work on the Cross.

If Abraham was justified by his own works of righteousness, he would be able to boast of having attained Heaven by his own effort.

Paul said in Romans 3:27, "Where is boasting then? It is excluded." Not even Father Abraham can boast before God! Besides, the Scripture is abundantly clear about how Abraham was justified.

Romans 4:3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."

This is a quote from Genesis fifteen. Abraham was justified, he was saved, by simply believing God's promise to him. Even in the Old Testament no one - including Abraham - was ever saved by their own works of righteousness.

The Jewish teachers of Paul's day taught that Abraham was justified by his works, by keeping the law. One ancient passage from the rabbis says: "We find that Abraham our father had performed the whole Law before it was given" and "Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord." The rabbis argued that Abraham kept the law perfectly, even before it was given, in that he kept it by intuition or anticipation.

Abraham's righteousness did not come from his performance of good works, but from his belief in God. It was a righteousness obtained through faith.

Abraham was a Gentile pagan idolater in the land of Ur when God called him. He was not performing works of righteousness, making himself ready for salvation. God revealed Himself to Abraham while he was yet ungodly. Abraham believed God and then God "accounted" him righteous.

This word "accounted" is also translated "reckoned" or "imputed" or "counted." It is a banking term, borrowed from bookkeepers. It means *to put over into your account*; it means *to make an entry in your ledger*. If you could have seen Abraham's ledger sheet before he believed God it would have been filled with the record of his sins. The moment Abraham believed God, his sins were put over to the account of Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ's righteousness was put over into Abraham's account. Thus Abraham was saved - justified while he was yet ungodly - having no righteousness of his own to offer God.

Paul offers an illustration from everyday life in verses four and five.

Romans 4:4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

The idea of grace stands opposite to the principle of works. Grace has to do with receiving the freely given gift of God, while works has to do with earning our merit before God. A system of works seeks to put God in debt to us, to have God owe us His favor because of our good behavior. In works-thinking, God owes us salvation or blessing because of our good works.

Romans 4:5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

Think of an automatic deposit of your paycheck into your bank account. If you work, you earn the money that is put into your account. What is the "work" you must do to have Jesus Christ's righteousness put into your account? According to Jesus Himself, in John 6:29, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."

When you believe in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation, God not only cancels your debt of sin, he also makes an automatic deposit of all Heaven's resources into your account.

God *only* justifies the ungodly. No one can ever first cease to be ungodly, then believe. While yet ungodly, you believe and God justifies you.

Abraham clearly had no personal righteousness before he was saved. While he was yet ungodly, God justified him.

How extensive is justification? By that I mean must you work to achieve and maintain personal righteousness in order to become fully justified?

Paul gives you the illustration of David, quoting Psalm thirty-two:

Romans 4:6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

Romans 4:7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered;

Romans 4:8 Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin."

David, a justified man, went on to sin wickedly. He committed adultery; he committed murder; he was a hypocrite. **Yet he was saved!** At one point he cried out to God, saying, "restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation." He had lost his joy, *not* his justification.

Warren Wiersbe says,

Once we are justified, our record contains Christ's perfect righteousness *and can never again contain our sins*. Christians do sin, and these sins need to be forgiven if we are to have fellowship with God, *but these sins are not held against us*. God does keep a record of our works, so that He might reward us when Jesus comes; but He is not keeping a record of our sins.

This is the "blessedness" that is mentioned by both David and Paul, that "lawless deeds are forgiven... sins are covered... and the Lord shall not impute sin."

Be careful that you understand what I am saying. I am only saying what the Bible says - that you are fully justified the moment you believe in Jesus. You do not start on a path towards final justification, towards the mere possibility of justification if you achieve and maintain a certain personal righteousness. If that were the case, David could not be in Heaven today. If that were the case, no one would ever be in Heaven, for we all continue to sin! David was fully justified from the moment he believed God. You are fully justified from the moment you believe God.

You cannot see into the courtroom of Heaven to see who God has justified. You only see the results of justification in the behavior of men on earth. Justification in Heaven is proved by purity on earth. What you are in Jesus Christ will be seen in what you are before men.

Habitual sinners prove they have never been justified. Saints still sin; but when they do, they remain saints and can thank God for the blessedness that their "lawless deeds are forgiven...[their] sins are covered...and the Lord shall not impute sin."

In justification, God doesn't declare you "godly" - He declares you "righteous." He accepts you because you stand in His imputed righteousness. Once you are justified, God works in you to produce godliness day-by-day. Our justification is not God making us perfectly righteous, but **counting** us as perfectly righteous. After we are counted righteous, then God begins making us truly righteous, culminating in our resurrection.

Justification is the act of God by which God gets us out of sin legally. Sanctification is the process by which God gets sin out of us actually.

You can see this in the life of Abraham. He was justified by faith in Genesis 15. In James 2:21 you read that Abraham was justified by works. It's not a contradiction. Thirty years after he was justified by faith his justification was **vindicated** by his works when he started to sacrifice Isaac. It was the outward demonstration he had been truly justified by faith.

Justification is not attained or maintained by personal righteousness. Neither is it attained or maintained by the performance of any rite or ritual.

The great rite of God's sanctioned religion was the sign of circumcision - the cutting away of the foreskin. In verses nine through twelve you see that Abraham was already justified more than a decade before circumcision was first required. Circumcision is not necessary for salvation - nor can any other rite or ritual save you.

Romans 4:9 Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness.

Romans 4:10 How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.

The argument is almost too simple. If Abraham was already justified by faith prior to his circumcision some fourteen years later, then no rite or ritual is necessary for salvation - only believing!

Romans 4:11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also,

Circumcision was an outward sign to demonstrate the inward grace of salvation that had already occurred. Circumcision was a sign of faith - **not** a substitute for it!

Romans 4:12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.

Something much deeper is indicated in Abraham's justification by faith. Even though he would go on to be the physical father of a new nation, he would also be the spiritual father of any from all nations who believed God and were justified by faith. Abraham is the Bible's example for all men everywhere from all time of salvation by grace through faith alone. God's plan of salvation includes a special place and purpose for the literal descendants of Abraham, but it excludes no one.

Romans 4:13 For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

Abraham was saved before the law was even given. Rules cannot save you, even if they are God's divinely sanctioned rules. You are saved apart from keeping rules through the imputed righteousness of faith.

Obedience to the principles and precepts of the Old Testament law, given much later to Moses, had to do with the behavior of an already redeemed people. It's goal wasn't to save them, but so that they might secure for themselves health, happiness, and practical holiness.

Just so, the principles and precepts of the New Testament do not add to your salvation. Obedience to them secures for you peace, prosperity, and power.

Romans 4:14 For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect,

Romans 4:15 because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.

If you could inherit eternal life by keeping God's rules, eternal life would not be a "promise" you could ever be certain of. You'd always fall short because until we go to be with the Lord we continue to sin.

No one can perfectly keep God's law; it only reveals the wrath of God against your sin, and against you as a sinner.

“Transgression” is the violation of a known law. Paul did not say that where there is no law, there is no sin. He simply pointed out that it becomes known as a transgression when there is a law forbidding it.

It's wrong, a sin as it were, to speed through a school zone. It becomes a transgression when a sign goes up limiting your speed.

Obedying the law cannot save you from the penalty of sin. It only serves to reveal your guilt. If you are to be saved, God must remove the penalty of sin, and this He can only do by declaring you righteous on the basis of believing what Jesus has accomplished on the Cross. It's the only way.

- Justification is the act of God which saves us from the past penalty of sin.
- Sanctification is the process, in which we must cooperate with God, that is saving us from the present power of sin.
- Glorification is the future act of God that will save us from the very presence of sin forever!

