

## The Righteousness God Gives

---

David Carter / General Adult

Unshakeable: Romans / Romans 4:1-17

---

Let me ask you something this morning.

How many of you were raised with this mentality — you want something, you work for it? You earn it. Nothing in this life is given to you, you go out and get it.

I think that's especially true for many of us in this room. It wasn't something we necessarily heard — it was something we watched.

I think of my own upbringing, most of my life raised by a single mom, watching her work two, sometimes three jobs just to put food on the table.

That instills something in you.

Maybe you witnessed something similar. Maybe your parents came here with nothing, worked hard, sacrificed, built something from nothing and passed that value down to you.

Work hard. Earn your place. Prove yourself.

And honestly — there is something beautiful about that. In most areas of life it's exactly the right approach. You want a good career; you work for it. You want to provide for your family; you sacrifice for it.

The problem is that many of us take that same mentality and bring it right into our relationship with God.

We think if that's how we have to earn things in this world, that's how it works with God.

That our standing before God works the same way. That if I just work hard enough, pray enough, serve enough, be good enough — God will accept me.

But this morning Paul is going to tell us clearly — that's not how it works. That instinct, as good as it serves you everywhere else, will actually keep you from the very thing you're looking for.

Because there are some things in this life that cannot be earned. They can only be received.

And righteousness, a right standing before God is one of them.

Here's what Paul wants us to see, the message for us this morning.

That righteousness or a right standing with God is not something we earn, it's something we're given.

So the message for you and me this morning is ***stop trying to earn what only God can give.***

[Romans 4:1-17](#)

We've been journeying through Romans, through some deep waters these past few weeks.

Paul has been diagnosing the human condition, showing us why we need the gospel so that we can appreciate the beauty of it and understand why it's vital.

And here's the problem he's been pressing on us.

You and I were created to reflect the righteousness of God. Made in His image, to live in relationship with Him, to reflect who He is in the way we live.

But so often, we know we fall short. Every single one of us. Drastically short.

And that means there is a serious gap between who God is and who we are. A gap that a holy God cannot simply overlook or pretend isn't there.

So how does that gap get closed?

Last week Paul gave us the answer with this word — justification.

And we talked about what that means. Remember the courtroom? The verdict is guilty; justice has to be satisfied and yet God also desires to show mercy.

How can He do both?

But what if someone else stepped in and paid it?

That's the cross. That's what Jesus does. Jesus satisfies justice, so that you and I can be declared right, or righteous before God.

When your record is opened in the courtroom of heaven it doesn't read condemned. It reads paid in full. Because Jesus paid it all.

That's justification. Not because we earned it or deserved it — but because Jesus satisfied what we couldn't.

And Paul is clear — justification comes by faith in Jesus Christ. You can't earn or achieve it. It comes only by faith.

But maybe that raises a question. Is this new? Is Paul making this up?

Paul anticipates that question. And his answer is — not even close.

That has always been God's plan and Paul goes all the way back to Abraham, all the way back to Genesis to show us, that faith is always how God declared people righteous.

Look with me at verses 1-5.

**Romans 4:1-3 ESV**

***What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."***

Righteousness comes by faith.

## **RIGHTEOUS BY FAITH**

But that has always been God's plan and Paul goes all the way back to Abraham to show us that faith is always how God declared people righteous.

And he goes back to Abraham because Abraham was considered the patriarch of the Jews.

They believed that Abraham was the guy from whom all their promises flowed. So if Paul could show them that even Abraham was made right with God by faith, it would change everything.

And he does exactly that.

He says look, if Abraham earned his righteousness, he has something to boast about before God. But then he says — what does Scripture say?

And that's important. Paul isn't just sharing his opinion here. He's going to the authority of God's Word. If God's Word teaches it, it's the truth. So what does God's Word say?

The key verse is Verse 3 — ***Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.***

Where does that come from? Paul takes us all the way back to [Genesis 15](#).

See God had been promising Abraham that he would have a son, and that through that son he would father an entire nation. But 25 years have passed and still no child. And Abraham is starting to wonder — maybe it's going to be through my servant, maybe he's the one I declare as my heir.

But God speaks to Abraham and says — no. Your very own son will be your heir.

And in [Genesis 15](#) God takes Abraham outside and says — look at the stars. Can you count them?

I don't think God literally wanted Abraham to start counting — but His point is clear. Your descendants will be as numerous as those stars.

God makes Abraham this promise.

And here's the key — Abraham believed God. He trusted Him. He placed his faith in that promise. And because he trusted in God's promise, God counted his faith as righteousness.

Now don't miss the connection here.

God has made you and I a promise through His Son. He has promised us that if we believe in Jesus our sin will be forgiven. That if we trust in what Jesus accomplished — going to the cross, bearing our sin, dying in our place, rising from the dead — that new life is available to us in that resurrection.

When we believe that promise — like Abraham believed God's promise — that faith, that trust, is counted to us as righteousness.

That's the connection – God has always justified his people, declared them righteous by faith, He did with Abraham, He does it with us today.

Now what does it mean when Paul says that God counted or credited it to him as righteousness?

Notice verse 4 again – ***Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.***

That word — counted or credited — it's actually an accounting term.

In basic accounting, everything comes down to two columns. You have debits and you have credits.

A debit is money going out. It's a charge against your account. It's what you owe. Every time you spend money, every time a bill comes due, that's a debit — it reduces what you have.

A credit is the opposite. It's money coming in. It's something being deposited into your account. It increases what you have.

Now think about your life before God in those terms.

Every sin — every time we fall short of God's righteous standard — that's a debit. That's a charge against our account. And Paul has already shown us earlier in Romans that every single one of us has been racking up debits our entire lives. Every one of us.

And here's the problem. We are not just slightly overdrawn.

We are completely bankrupt.

There is nothing in our account. No number of good deeds, no religious effort, no trying harder is going to dig us out of that deficit. The debt is too great. We cannot pay what we owe.

But here's what the gospel does.

When you place your faith in Jesus Christ, two things happen simultaneously.

First — every debit, every sin, every charge against your account is transferred to Jesus. He takes on what you owe. All of it. And He pays it in full on the cross.

But it doesn't stop there.

Jesus doesn't just zero out your account.

He credits His righteousness to your account. His perfect, spotless, holy righteousness — deposited in full to your account by faith.

So you don't just go from bankrupt to breaking even.

You go from bankrupt to fully righteous before God.

That's what counted means. That's what credited means.

God looks at your account and instead of seeing all your sin and all your debt — He sees the righteousness of His Son.

Not because you earned it. Not because you deserved it. But because you believed. Just like Abraham believed.

But Paul makes this even clearer, he gives an example, we can understand even in modern day terms, look at verses 4 and 5.

**Romans 4:4–5 ESV**

***Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,***

He uses the simplest illustration — a paycheque.

When you go to work, when you put in your hours, when you do your job — your employer doesn't hand you your paycheque as a gift. That's not a gift. That's what you earned. That's what you're owed. You worked for it; it belongs to you.

That's how we think righteousness works with God isn't it? I put in the hours. I do the religious work. I serve, I give, I pray, I show up. And at the end of it God owes me something. I've earned it.

But Paul says that's not how righteousness works.

Righteousness is not a paycheque. You cannot clock in enough hours to earn it. You cannot work hard enough to make God owe it to you.

It comes as a gift.

It is given to the one who stops trying to earn it — and simply trusts in the God who justifies the ungodly.

And I love that phrase — the God who justifies the ungodly. Not the deserving. Not the religious. Not the good enough. The ungodly.

That's who God credits righteousness to. The one who comes to Him with nothing in their hands and simply believes.

And maybe that's the message some of us need to hear this morning. Maybe some of us have been treating our relationship with God like a paycheque.

Like if I just serve enough, give enough, show up enough — God owes me something. But that's not grace. That's not faith. Paul is clear — faith and works are opposites. You cannot earn what God freely gives.

So what does it mean to have faith? If faith is what saves us, if faith is what gives us access to righteousness, then what does it mean to believe?

Because faith isn't some mystical force. Faith isn't an emotion. It's not something magical that you conjure up on the inside.

Faith is an active trust and reliance on the promises of God.

We put our faith in things every single day without even thinking about it.

When you sat down in those pews this morning, you trusted that they were going to hold you up. You didn't inspect every joint; you didn't test the weight capacity — you just sat down. You relied on it.

Most of you drove here this morning. You put your trust, your reliance in that car to get you here safely. Or maybe someone else drove you — and you put your faith in that driver.

We do it instinctively. We do it constantly.

But here's where faith in Jesus is a different category altogether. Because those are low stakes aren't they?

If the pew breaks, you hit the floor. If the car breaks down, you call a tow truck.

Faith in Jesus is more like standing at the edge of a cliff with a bungee cord tied to your leg. And everything in you has to decide — do I trust this cord to hold me?

Because if it doesn't hold — you're done.

That's not passive faith. That is a decisive, all in, irreversible moment of trust.

And that's what faith in Jesus looks like.

It is an active trust and reliance that what Jesus did on the cross — bearing your sin, dying in your place — and what God accomplished in the resurrection — raising Jesus from the dead — is enough.

It is enough to satisfy justice. It is enough to credit righteousness to your account. It is enough to make you right with God.

That kind of faith. That kind of trust. That is what saves you.

But just in case Abraham wasn't convincing enough, Paul leaves with this point with one more Old Testament heavy hitter, he says this was true of Abraham, this was also true of David.

That's what it does in verses 6-8.

**Romans 4:6-8 ESV**

***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.”***

Abraham trusted and believed and was counted as righteous. David, believed in God's promise and his sin was forgiven, counted as righteous.

When you and I place that same kind of trust, that same kind of faith in God's promise of His Son, we are counted righteous.

Stop trying to earn what God has freely given to us through Jesus.

Righteousness by faith alone...And if it comes by faith alone, that means you cannot earn it or achieve it.

Even through religion or religious works. Righteousness can't be earned through religion. Religion does not make you righteous.

## RELIGION

That's what Paul wants us to understand in verses 9-12.

Look there with me.

### **Romans 4:9-11 ESV**

***Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well.***

That word circumcised, comes up a lot. It's hard for us to relate because in our day circumcision has usually been done in the past for health reasons.

But for the Jews, especially Old Testament Jews, it was an outward sign of their identity as God's chosen people. It was a sign of all the covenant promises God made to them.

So for them, circumcision was a physical sign of a spiritual reality, it was a sign that separated them from other nations. They were God's people, they were part of God's promises, they were set apart physically and spiritually.

So the argument might have been, we don't need Jesus, righteousness doesn't come through faith in Jesus, but rather we are the circumcised, we already have access to God's promises.

Righteousness doesn't come through faith Paul, righteousness comes through circumcision, in fact they would point to the fact that after God gave this promise to Abraham, Abraham circumcised himself and his whole household as a sign of the covenant promise.

But Paul makes this subtle, not so subtle point. Do you see it? He says when was Abraham circumcised?

Before or after he was counted as righteous by his faith?

You see that in verse 10-11.

**Romans 4:10-11 ESV**

***How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.***

Do you see what his argument is? He's arguing the order, because the order matters.

The scripture doesn't say that Abraham was circumcised and then counted righteous, no. It says he believed, and was counted righteous, and then he was circumcised. That matters.

In fact, he wasn't circumcised until two chapters later, when 20 years had passed, so for 20 years or more Abraham was not circumcised and yet still counted righteous.

He was righteous before he was circumcised which mean the circumcision isn't what made him righteous, his faith made him righteous.

But Paul says the circumcision was a sign of his righteousness.

Understand circumcision wasn't the problem.

It was a real sign of a real covenant. The problem was when they started trusting in the sign itself rather than the God the sign pointed to.

That detail is important, because we are in the danger of doing the same thing.

Of thinking that it is our religious works that make us righteous.

Like, maybe we think that my righteousness comes through my baptism, or maybe we think I'm righteous because I go to church on Sunday, or I pray every day or read the bible every day. Maybe I think that I am righteous before God because I give of my offering and tithes every week, or maybe because I serve and give my time, because I'm an elder a director, a pastor, or a preacher.

All of those things are important, they are real signs that God may be working in you and through you, but they are not what make you or I righteous before God.

It's so important for us to see the order... you and I are counted righteous before God by our faith. The moment that you place your faith in Jesus you are counted righteous.

The work, the religious work is a sign that God is working in me, that I have indeed been found righteous.

I place my faith in Jesus and I have been found righteous, how do I know? Because I want to be baptized. It's this outward symbol, this outward sign that I am no longer who I used to be, I have placed my faith in Jesus, I am forgiven, redeemed, cleansed and I want to show the world – so I get baptized.

Baptism isn't what saves you, it's a sign that you have been saved.

And here's what I want you to hear this morning.

If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ — you are already righteous before God. Right now. Fully. Completely.

Not because of what you've done. But because of what Jesus has done. His righteousness has been credited to your account. Paid in full.

Stop trying to earn what only God can give.

And yet so many of us live like we're still trying to earn it.

We wake up on Monday morning and we feel distant from God and so we think — I need to read more, pray more, do more. Like somehow my spiritual performance this week is going to determine how God feels about me.

God's love for you is not determined by your performance. His affection toward you doesn't go up when you have a great quiet time and come down when you miss a few days. You are not more righteous before God on the Sundays you serve than on the Sundays you don't.

You are righteous because Jesus is righteous. And His righteousness has been credited to you by faith.

Stop trying to earn what God has already freely given you.

Rest in it.

This is not just a Jewish issue; it's a humanity issue.

There are entire religions built around trying to earn righteousness through religious signs and rituals instead of God Himself.

Take Roman Catholicism for example — and I say this not to attack Catholic people, but to simply share truth — but the Roman Catholic system teaches that sacraments, that religious rituals, that confession, mass, penance, these things contribute to your righteousness before God. That the doing of religious things secures your standing with God.

And Paul would say the same thing to that system that he said to the Jews — the sign is not the thing itself.

Baptism doesn't save you. Mass doesn't save you. Confession to a priest doesn't save you. Penance doesn't save you.

Only Jesus can save you.

Stop trying to earn what only God can give.

Righteousness, a right standing with God comes by faith alone.

You can't earn it through religious works.

But maybe you're sitting there thinking — I'm not really a religious person, that's not really my issue.

Fair enough. But there's another way we try to earn what only God can give. And it's actually the most common assumption of people who have never stepped foot in a church.

The idea that being a good person is enough.

Righteousness, a right standing with God is not earned by simply being a good person.

## **GOOD PERSON**

Paul addresses that too. Look with me at verses 13 through 17.

Paul says you cannot earn it by being a good person.

### **Romans 4:13–16 ESV**

***For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.***

***That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,***

We keep seeing that word law come up, Paul says that righteousness cannot come through the Law, for the Law brings wrath, it depends on faith and not the Law.

Most times when we see the word law, especially in Romans, Paul is referring to the Old Testament Law, the Mosaic Law, the 10 commandments.

Essentially, it was a list of rules, regulations that God gave to Israel. And we've talked about this in previous weeks, but just so we're clear, the Law, the role of

the Law was never meant to be a way to get to God, the role of the Law is simply to reveal what righteousness looks like.

Especially the 10 commandments, they show us this is what righteousness looks like.

The law shows us when we're wrong, but it can't show us how to get right, it shows us what righteousness is, but not how to achieve it.

So the issue was never the Law, the issue was that Israel thought they could keep the law and fulfill righteousness.

But they fell short. Because the Law wasn't just about our actions, it's about the state of our heart, our desires.

But for most people, you may not have been raised with the Law, but you were still raised with a moral code, a sense of morality, a conscience that tells you what is right and what is wrong.

We know instinctively, it's wrong to take what doesn't belong to me, to harm another person.

But here's what we find, we find that we fall short of even our own moral code.

How often does your conscience tell you that you shouldn't do something, but you still do it? How often do you feel a certain way about someone, or something and you feel guilty about that?

What becomes clear is that righteousness isn't earned by being a good person. You see, while we may be good at keeping some laws, or some morality, there is this inner conflict that we fail at other things.

And here's what we have to be honest about this morning.

The standard isn't other people. We already saw that back in [Romans 2](#) — you can always find someone worse than you. You can always make yourself look good by comparison. But that's not the standard.

The standard is the perfect righteousness of God.

And measured against that standard — nobody is good enough. Not even close.

But here's what makes it even more sobering. It's not just that we fail sometimes. It's not just that we have a few bad days mixed in with the good ones. It's that even our best moments, even our most generous, most kind, most selfless moments — are tainted. Mixed motives. Pride. Self-interest. The desire to be seen, to be appreciated, to feel good about ourselves.

Even our goodness falls short of what God requires.

The prophet Isaiah put it this way — all our righteous acts are like filthy rags before God. Not our sin. Our righteousness. Our best stuff.

If that's true — and it is — then no amount of being a good person is going to close the gap between who we are and what God requires.

You cannot be good enough because the standard is perfection. And perfection is something only Jesus has ever achieved.

And that's exactly why Paul says righteousness cannot come through the Law. Not because the Law is bad. But because we are incapable of keeping it perfectly.

Maybe you're here this morning and you think — I'm a good person. I strive to be a good person. And that's enough. I believe God exists, but I'm not ready to go all in. I'll just focus on being a good person.

Can I be honest with you this morning?

Believing God exists isn't the same thing as faith. James tells us that even the demons believe God exists — and they tremble. Intellectual acknowledgment isn't saving faith. Faith is active trust. Faith is all in.

And here's the harder question — good compared to who?

Compared to the person next to you, maybe you're doing alright. Compared to the worst people you can think of, sure, you come out looking pretty good.

But that's not the standard.

The standard is the perfect righteousness of God. And we already know how that comparison ends. We all fall short. Every single one of us.

There is only one person who has ever met that standard.

Jesus Christ.

And the only way His righteousness becomes yours is not by being good enough.

It's by faith.

Stop trying to earn what only God can give.

So here's where Paul has brought us this morning.

Righteousness — a right standing with God — is not something you earn. It's something you receive.

You can't earn it through religious works. Baptism doesn't give it to you. Church attendance doesn't give it to you. Serving, giving, showing up — none of it gives it to you.

You can't earn it by being a good person. Your moral code won't get you there. Your best efforts won't close the gap.

There is only one way.

Faith. Active, all in, irreversible trust in Jesus Christ and what He accomplished on the cross and in the resurrection.

Like Abraham — who believed God's promise and it was counted to him as righteousness — God is making you a promise this morning. That if you trust in His Son, if you place your faith in what Jesus did for you, His righteousness will be credited to your account.

Not because you earned it. Because He gave it.

And for those of us who have already placed our faith in Christ — stop living like you still have something to prove. Stop striving for God's approval like it hasn't already been given. You are not more loved on your best days than your worst days. You are fully righteous before God because of Jesus — not because of you.

Rest in that.

Stop trying to earn what only God can give.

Let me pray for us this morning.