

Making Things Clear

Romans 4:1-25

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It is a good discipline to ensure you are clear on what someone is saying before you respond. It is easy to assume things—we do it all the time—and these assumptions can lead to major problems in a relationship. This is especially true in marriage. The best way to prevent this from happening is to ask the person if you can replay what you think you heard them say. Then repeat what you thought you heard them say.

When you do this, the other person can clarify and restate things, so communication on important issues does not go wrong. In a sense, this is what Paul is doing in the book of Romans: He states a gospel truth and then often states it again in another way so these eternally important truths will not be misunderstood. We must listen carefully to what is being said so we don't miss these carefully nuanced truths about the gospel.

Paul has been arguing that we are made right with God, not by our good deeds (because we have none) but by God's gracious act in sending His Son as a payment for our sin. People resist this notion of grace because they have learned the wrong way of salvation. All their lives they have had it drilled into them that you have to "do good to get to Heaven". We grow up believing that if we are "good enough" we will get to go to Heaven.

Paul is laboring to show that no one can be "good enough" and therefore we can only be saved by a gracious act of mercy on God's part. In order to prove his point, Paul suggests we look at the patron saint of the Jews; a man known for his faith and his righteousness before God. This man is Abraham. Paul asks the question: How was Abraham made right with God?

What Paul does in chapter 4 of Romans is the same thing we should do with new concepts: Go back to the Word of God and see if what is being taught is consistent with what the Bible teaches. This is important—eternally important. We need to clarify how we find forgiveness and a new life. So, let's follow Paul's argument.

Abraham Was Not Justified by His Good Deeds

Paul begins with the Father of the Jewish race, Abraham. In Genesis 12 God called Abraham to follow Him and promised that He would make him into a great nation and through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Listen as Paul examines Abraham's experience.

Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What did he discover about being made right with God? ² If his good deeds had made him acceptable to God, he would have had something to boast about. But that was not God's way. ³ For the Scriptures tell us, "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith."

⁴ When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned. ⁵ But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners.

Paul anticipates resistance to the idea of being saved as a gift from God. In His day, as in ours, most people believed if you are good enough and religious enough, you get to go to Heaven. Paul points to Abraham to show that salvation **has always** been a gift that is received by faith.

God called Abraham in Genesis 12, and then in Genesis 15, God appeared to him again and reiterated His promise. Abraham pointed out that he and his wife Sarah were getting too old to have children, so . . . the whole thing about numerous descendants couldn't happen. God reminded Abraham that he was God and could do what He said He would do. Then we are told "And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith."

The first thing Paul wants us to see is the wording, he believed every Word in the Bible was inspired by God. It was trustworthy so when it says, "it was credited to him . . ." the word "credited" is significant: "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation." (v. 4). The word for "credit" or "counted" argues Paul, means to be given something as an undeserved gift. When you get paid at the end of the week for working, you don't consider it a "gift" . . . it is the payment for work that has been done. It is a wage, not a gift!

Notice verse 5 – "And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." Paul does not call believers "the cream of the crop" he saw we are the ungodly. It is not our deeds but our faith that makes us right before God. This is stunning and it is meant to be.

This process of being given the righteousness of Christ is wonderfully illustrated by an account in the Old Testament book of Zechariah chapter 3,

Then the angel showed me Jeshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD. The Accuser, Satan, was there at the angel's right hand, making accusations against Jeshua. ² And the LORD said to Satan, "I, the LORD, reject your accusations, Satan. Yes, the LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebukes you. This man is like a burning stick that has been snatched from the fire."

³ Jeshua's clothing was filthy as he stood there before the angel. ⁴ So the angel said to the others standing there, "Take off his filthy clothes." And turning to Jeshua he said, "See, I have taken away your sins, and now I am giving you these fine new clothes."

⁵ Then I said, "They should also place a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean priestly turban on his head and dressed him in new clothes while the angel of the LORD stood by.

To be declared righteous is to be like this priest. We (in our lives) are like a "burning stick that has been snatched from the fire." When we come to faith in Jesus, we have "dirty clothes;" we are

still stained by sin. When we are counted as righteous (declared by God to be in right standing with Him, our sin is replaced with the righteousness of Christ.) Our dirty clothes are exchanged for clean and white clothes provided by Christ. His righteousness is actually attributed (or paid) to our account. When God looks at us, He sees the perfection of Christ! He takes our sinful deeds and dies to pay for them. We are made right before God (justified and made righteous) not because of what we have done, but because of what God has graciously done for us through Christ.

Paul adds another addition to this by looking at Israel's greatest king – David. He spoke about this righteousness from God when He wrote,

⁷ “Oh, what joy for those
 whose disobedience is forgiven,
 whose sins are put out of sight.
⁸ Yes, what joy for those
 whose record the LORD has cleared of sin.”

I suspect you remember that David was the greatest King of Israel, but he also made some terrible mistakes. The most blatant was committing adultery with the wife of one of his most valued soldiers while he was away fighting *David's war!* Bathsheba ended up pregnant and David tried to cover it up a couple of times. When he was unsuccessful, he ensured Uriah, her husband was in a position where he would be killed. Adultery. Deception. Murder. When David was confronted with his sin, he confessed it and then wrote this Psalm (32) that is partially quoted by Paul.

One commentator says the point of bringing David into this picture is to show that,
 If Abraham was not justified by works, despite righteous deeds, then David was not condemned for lawlessness, despite grave sins. Abraham's life declares that our good deeds do not justify us; David's life teaches that misdeeds do not condemn us. So David pronounces a blessing on the person for whom God reckons righteousness apart from works. (Dorani, ROMANS p.94)

David experienced an undeserved grace. He, like we, had to humble himself and turn to God, willing to repent of his actions.

Abraham was not Justified by His Religious Acts (9-15)

In the next verses, Paul knows some of the Jewish people will argue that Abraham was blessed because of his Jewishness. Paul asked the question: “Was Abraham declared righteous before or after he was circumcised (which at the time was distinctly Jewish)? God called Abraham in Genesis 12, He was counted as righteous in chapter 15, and the sign of circumcision (separating the Jews from the rest of the world) was declared in Genesis 17! Paul says,

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,¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

The conclusion is that Abraham's (and by extension David's) right standing with God was not because of his circumcision or even his willingness to sacrifice his own Son." It is not that circumcision wasn't significant; he says it serves as a seal, sign, or outward expression of what God had done for Abraham by His mercy and grace. If you see a road sign to Macomb it points to Macomb but it is not Macomb. In the same way the sign, the religious practices, point to our salvation but does not bring it about.

Paul stresses this teaching (and we stress it) because we are constantly slipping back into a performance mentality. We want to make numerous things into requirements for salvation. Things like baptism, an altar call, a particular prayer that is prayed, a certain Bible from which you read, a particular opinion you hold on various theological points, the right political view, a particular experience, a gift you possess, and so on goes the list.

All of these things may be indicators of salvation, meaning they take place because you have faith in Christ . . .but they do not earn that salvation! We are all saved by faith . . . which raises another question: What does it mean to "have faith."

What is Faith?

Faith is a word we use frequently. Sometimes we use it to mean wishful thinking as in "I have faith that our team can come up with a game-winning drive." Or "I have faith that if I was given the opportunity to be President, I would excel."

Some people see faith as something you need to muster up. They teach, If you have "enough faith" you can cast off your sickness and be healed or what we really want will be given to us.

Still others see "faith" as a body of truth that must be affirmed. You will hear people all the time who say, "I believe in God." They see faith as affirming certain things to be true. The result is we believe if we can get someone to say they believe that "Jesus died for their sins, and rose again, and want Him to be my Savior," those words will lead to salvation. True faith is more than this.

Paul wrote,

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be."¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.²⁰ No unbelief made

him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”

Faith is trusting God. It is taking Him at His word and living accordingly. Abraham believed God when He said he would have a son. He believed when the angels said Sarah would have a child at 90 and he would be 100 years old. He believed when God told him to take his son and sacrifice him on Mt. Moriah. Abraham didn't let the circumstances or even the limits of logic keep him from trusting the character and the promise of God. He held fast to God's promise.

R.C. Sproul writes,

“Sometimes people get this all mixed up and think that saving faith is a leap into the dark. People are told, “Just close your eyes, take a deep breath, make a leap of faith, jump into the darkness, and pray that Jesus will be there to catch you.” Jesus never calls people to jump into the darkness. He calls them to jump out of the darkness. He never asks us to crucify our intellect to become Christians. Faith is not believing the absurd or the foolish. Faith is ultimately trusting what is preeminently trustworthy.” [Romans]

But, what is it that we are to believe about God? First and foremost we are to believe Him when says that the sacrifice of Jesus is sufficient for everyone who will put their faith in Him. We also believe and build our lives upon the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. By trusting and following Him we affirm that we will live even after we die. We will not only live, we will stand before God bearing the righteousness of Christ . . .or the new white clothes given by the Father.

We believe that God will right the wrongs in the world and one day He will return to make all things new, just as He promised. We show our faith by the way we live our lives. We live this new way not to try to earn salvation; we live this way as an expression of our faith and our salvation.

Faith is believing God has a purpose for all things, even the things that make no sense and seem so unfair. It is continuing to trust Him even when we are angry at the way life is going. Noah was building an Ark for years in what may have been an area that had no water. Everyone thought he was crazy, but Noah kept doing what God told Him to do.

Faith is telling others about Jesus even though we don't have the right words. We trust Him to provide the words we need, as He promised. Faith believes we will have the strength we need for the tough times of life. It is believing that nothing will separate us from His love and hanging on to that promise even when we feel the whole world has turned against us.

In the book of Hebrews we are told, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And a few verses later we are told, “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Faith is not something we muster up. It is not something that we “do”. It is a settled trust that guides our lives. This is why we have no reason to boast: Faith is not something *WE produce*, it is something God produces in us. He gives us a new desire to live and honor Him.

Conclusions

God’s gift of salvation means we are forgiven. This is staggering. We will be forgiven for

- The deception we have carried with us (even lying to ourselves)
- The slander we started against another (and felt good about it)
- The hatred that has kept us captive
- The hurt we have caused others
- The foolishness of our past and the sinful choices we have made
- The prejudices we once held
- The commands of God we ignored and the sin we justified

We all could add things to the list but the most important thing for we are forgiven is that thing in our life for which we feel we cannot be forgiven. Jesus died for ALL our sin. He offers it to us by His grace.

The person who truly has faith will live like they have faith. To say that we have faith in God; that we trust Him; means to follow where He leads and goes where He commands. The Lord calls us to a better life. He instructs us to allow the Holy Spirit to change our appetites and our purpose in life. We can do this joyfully because the burden of sin has been lifted, and we now know where we are headed because of God’s great mercy. The person who truly has faith will show a marked change in their behavior, but that change will be the result of faith, not an attempt to gain God’s favor.

May I ask? Is your faith wavering today? Are you facing circumstances you just don’t understand? Are you discouraged because you see sin still manifesting itself in your life? Are you working to do everything right, but everything is turning out wrong? Hang on! Don’t lose your faith. He is working even when we don’t see it. He is fashioning us into what He created us to be. These times of uncertainty are great opportunities to honor the One who died for us. Faith is active.

People sometimes say this invitation to embrace the grace of God sounds too good to be true. However, the more we work to understand what the gospel actually proclaims, the more we will see that what is “too good to be true” is even better than we can imagine.