

Lesson 6

The Faith of Abraham

What it means to be justified by faith apart from law

Introduction

Just a few verses before Romans 4 begins, Paul makes an authoritative statement:

For we conclude that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law, Romans 3.28.

There is no distinction for any person. If a person is saved, he will be saved by grace through faith, i.e., *the system of grace*. For the sake of review, when we refer to a system of law, we refer to commandment keeping to obtain salvation from God. It is receiving salvation based on a wage, i.e., receiving what is owed. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the system of grace. Rather than working their way to heaven, those who choose it see salvation as a gift from God that is obtained by faith or dependence on Christ's atoning sacrifice via the cross.

The purpose of Romans 4 is not to argue that Abraham's justification was not based on the law of Moses, as the Jews were already aware of this fact (Galatians 3.17). There is much more going on here than referencing the ineffectiveness of the old law (law of Moses) for salvation. While verse 16 points to the law of Moses, the rest of the references to *the law* in this chapter refer to law *in general* and the use of it as a way unto salvation. Paul also was not trying to establish that Abraham's justification came through a combination of faith and works (faith + works). Instead, in Romans 4, he will use Abraham as an example of the principle of salvation by grace and make the application at the end of that chapter that this is for us as well:

Now it was credited to him. It was not written for Abraham alone, but also for us. It will be credited to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 4.23-24.

In Romans 4, two systems of justification are under view and are presented in contrast. The following table is a great way to observe the contrast going on here visually.

It must be understood that the problem of trusting one's obedience as a way of retaining salvation is far from being *only* a Jewish problem. It is still a problem today for Christians who struggle with **legalism**⁴⁶. So, Paul is also working to

Law vs. Grace in Romans 4

LAW	GRACE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Works (4.2; 4; 6)• Boasting (4.2)• Wages (4.4)• Obligation/debt (4.4)• Sin (4.5; 7-8; 15)• Law (4.13-16)• Wrath (4.15)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Faith (4.3; 5; 9; 11-14; 16-20; 24)• Glorifying God (4.20)• Imputation (4.3-6; 8-11; 22-24)• Gift/grace (4.4; 16)• Imputed Righteousness (4.3; 5; 6; 9; 11; 13; 22)• Promise (4.13-14; 16; 20-21)• Forgiveness (4.7-8)

defend the cross.⁴⁷ Faith + works nullify the cross, Galatians 3.21. Mark Roberts has said, “A person doesn’t get into God’s family by being great at doing good.”⁴⁸ The cross is the basis of grace, and to receive grace requires faith. The conditions laid out by God are only the pathway *to the cross where God does the saving*. No part of salvation comes in the steps themselves.

Why does Paul use Abraham? He chose Abraham because of his high standing among the Jews. He is the perfect example of the grace system in action. If his Jewish readers could understand that God accepted Abraham based on grace and faith, not law-keeping, he felt he could make a lot of headway with those struggling with these concepts.

Before we dive into the chapter, we must also understand that what is said in Genesis 15.6 serves as a baseline for Paul’s teaching here:

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 15.6 is a universal principle of salvation.⁴⁹ It applies to all humans who have ever lived. No person can be saved except by God, counting their faith as righteousness. What Paul writes here is his essay on the system of faith revealed in Genesis and how this contrasts with a system of works.

Romans 4 can be divided into thirds, where Paul contrasts:

- 4.1-8: faith and works.
- 4.9-12: faith and circumcision.
- 4.13-22: faith and law

Let’s examine each one now.

Romans 4.1-8: Abraham: Justified by Faith Apart from Works

This section starts with a question. Paul asks about Abraham, the “father” of the Jewish people. Was he justified by faith or by works? Many of the Jews believed that his works justified him. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls says Abraham was “accounted a friend of God because he kept the commandments of God.”⁵⁰ A century and a half before Jesus, the first book of Maccabees proclaims that righteousness was imputed to him because Abraham was faithful in temptation.⁵¹ If that was true, Paul’s principle in Romans 3.28 was not held up. Instead, Paul completely denies that Abraham was justified by his works. If he were, then he would have a right to boast.

Instead, Paul says *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness*, 4.3. This is taken directly from Genesis 15.6, so this is not Paul’s *opinion*; it is **Scripture**, i.e., the final authority. The “belief” here in v. 3 refers to the faith system instead of the works system. Abraham *believed* or *depended on* the promises of God. This is seen in his surrender to God and subsequent obedience of faith, 1.5.

Credited as Righteousness

Credited, as used here, is a passive verb and is used 11 times in the chapter, so we must understand what it means. “**Credited**” is a term of commerce or business and means “to reckon,” “to count,” or “to take into account⁵².” In our terms today, we would liken it to depositing into a bank account. Paul says

righteousness was credited to Abraham's account. **Righteousness** is "the satisfaction of the requirements of God's law." What does God's law require? *Faith!* For God, faith equals righteousness. This does not mean faith *merits* righteousness or causes God to owe us salvation. It is not *faith* that is credited to one's account but the atoning blood of Jesus. What is credited to us is not something we do but receive as a gift.⁵³

It is also essential to understand *what* righteousness includes that is credited to our account. It is *not* the perfect life of Jesus, as many in the evangelical world believe. Christ obeyed the law perfectly because it was his responsibility and duty. Even though he was sinless, his perfect obedience did not leave any extra merits to share with anyone else. However, His perfect obedience was necessary for his perfect sacrifice, which was required for our salvation.

So, what is the basis for our justification? It is not Christ's personal righteous life or holiness but *his death*. By dying on the cross, Jesus satisfied not only the commandments of the law but also its penalty requirements. He took the punishment in our place through his substitutionary and propitiatory death, 2 Corinthians 5.21. This one act of righteousness constitutes God's righteousness, Romans 5.18. Here in Romans 4, Paul says it is Christ's satisfaction for the law's penalty requirement that is credited to our account as the righteousness of God. Essentially, the righteousness of God is the blood of Christ.⁵⁴ Holiness is not the cause of justification.

Righteousness is a state or something that we are. It means to be fully justified. It is the same thing as receiving forgiveness of sin. When God declares us righteous, we are *fully forgiven*. There is no such thing as relative forgiveness; we are either wholly forgiven or not at all forgiven. If you are forgiven, you are entirely forgiven if you continue demonstrating *dependence* (faith) in Jesus' atoning sacrifice on your behalf.

Works vs. Law

Verses 4-5 are in direct contrast to one another. When someone works for someone else, they do not receive pay as a *gift*; it is something owed. The employee has completed his side of the employment contract and gets a wage as pay. The employer is obligated to pay. When someone approaches their salvation this way, it is like working for wages. Under law, God pays what is owed. There is no grace. Instead, because no person can keep God's holy law in perfection, what is owed is death, 6.23. When we think of it, the law system is not an option we should want to choose. So, how is a person justified? Not by working. Justification comes by renouncing the law system in which one receives salvation, being paid for what is owed.

God justifies the ungodly, which is a striking image describing a state of wickedness. In Romans 1.18, God is portrayed as directing his wrath towards godlessness and unrighteousness. However, in Romans 4.5, God justifies the wicked who trust Jesus' atonement by saving them through grace. This is the complete opposite of what the law demands and is the antithesis of justification by law-keeping. Remarkably, God justifies the ungodly, Romans 4.5, and this passage may be one of the most surprising in all scripture.

God, the all-knowing and all-holy Judge, looks us in the eye and justifies us. He declares us righteous, fully acquits, pardons, and frees us from condemnation. It is truly amazing that the same God capable of wrath and punishment also offers mercy and salvation to those who trust Him.

A Quote from David

If using Abraham is insufficient, Paul now includes another Jewish hero, David, in his argument supporting salvation by grace. The universal principle of salvation, as illustrated in Genesis 15.6, is tightly connected to Psalm 32.1-2a:

How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How joyful is a person whom the Lord does not charge with iniquity . . .

This passage refers to how God regards the sins of a person who lives under the system of grace. Note:

- Our trespasses are forgiven.
- Our sins are covered.
- Our iniquities will not be charged against us.

To receive **forgiveness** means that we have received release from the debt or punishment of sin, to be pardoned. To have our sins **covered implies** that God has blotted them out of His sight. Because He looks at the atonement of Christ, he chooses not to hold our sins against us. When our sins are not **charged** against us, God chooses not to count them against us, placing them into our account so we bear punishment for them. Instead, those sins have been placed in Jesus' account, who bore our sins on our behalf.

Romans 4.6-8 is the culmination of the explanation of justification by grace that began in 3.21. It sheds light on the entire discussion and is crucial to understanding the thesis statement in 3:28. By being justified apart from works; God does not hold our sinful deeds against us. Being justified by faith apart from works of law means that God considers us righteous *because of our faith*, regardless of how we have responded to His law. To be justified by faith apart from works of law means that God counts us righteous because of our faith, 4.3, apart from considering how we have responded to his law. Our good responses to law, i.e., obedience, do not warrant our justification, nor do our wrong responses, i.e., sins, prevent it.⁵⁵

4.9-12: Faith and Circumcision

Now, Paul will demonstrate that the Jews who are saved share their relationship with Abraham based on faith, not his circumcision. Since this is the case, salvation is available to all – Jew or Gentile. Had Abraham already been circumcised when his faith had already been credited for righteousness, the Jews could have argued salvation was only for them. But, if Abraham was granted salvation before his circumcision, then salvation is for all. In verse 10, Paul says Abraham's faith was credited while uncircumcised. Therefore, circumcision was no factor in his justification whatsoever.

So, what was the significance of his circumcision? In verse 11, Paul calls it a *seal* or sign of the covenant he *already* made with God. It confirmed the truth or the reality of his righteous status. Here, Paul

challenged the traditional Jewish belief that being circumcised and belonging to the Jewish nation automatically entitled them to God's blessings and protection. He argues that Abraham's true descendants share his faith in God, regardless of nationality. Paul asserts that being Jewish should no longer be defined solely by one's lineage or physical markers like circumcision; instead, it should be characterized by a life of faith and a response to God's word. He emphasizes that the way to God is through faith (dependence or trust), not membership in any specific nation or external rituals. This would have been the equivalent of an earthquake on the traditional Jewish beliefs by demonstrating that faithful Jews are those who have faith in God, like Abraham, regardless of their nationality or physical traits.

4.13-22: Faith and Law

In these verses, Paul stresses that salvation comes not because of works done in response to the law but on the condition of grace. First, in verse 13, Paul says the promise did not come through a system of law; it came by faith. The focus in verse 13 is on *the promise*. Abraham was promised a land, offspring, and to be a blessing for all the nations of earth. On what basis did he receive these things? Paul says, *through the righteousness that comes by faith*. If the promises had been based upon adherence to law, then the promises were of no value. Those who choose law-keeping to relate to God cancel the promise because the two systems cannot co-exist. Notice what Paul says in Galatians:

For if the inheritance is based on the law, it is no longer based on the promise; but God has graciously given it to Abraham through the promise, Galatians 3.18.

Salvation is either given to us either by law or by promise. God is the author of both, but they cannot operate simultaneously. Law and promise belong to different categories of thought, which are incompatible. God's law makes demands that we cannot keep, and so we incur wrath, 4.15. God's grace makes promises which we believe, and so we receive the blessing, 4.14, 16. Law language ('you shall') demands our obedience, but promise language ('I will') demands our faith. What God said to Abraham was not 'Obey this law, and I will bless you,' but 'I will bless you; believe my promise.'⁵⁶

Why do law and grace not operate together? *Because the law produces wrath, 4.15*. Law turns our misdeeds into sin. Sin brings wrath. On the other side, *where there is no law, there is no transgression*. So, Paul says, the promise (salvation) is *by faith so that it may be according to grace*. The principle here is that God is gracious, and salvation comes by his grace. Period. As humans, all we can do is humbly *receive* what grace offers.⁵⁷ The function of faith is to humbly accept what grace provides. Faith is the key that fits the lock that opens the treasure-house of grace.⁵⁸ Otherwise, grace would no longer be grace.

The Mosaical law is undoubtedly in view in verse 16. Paul's purpose is to show that salvation could not come through it (or any law system) because salvation is not just for the Jews . . . but for all who believe by faith. All stand equally before the cross. The system of grace makes it possible for Jews and Gentiles to be included in Abraham's family of the redeemed. *He is the father of us all*.

4.17-22: What it means to believe.

What does Abraham's faith teach us about the faith we should possess today? Faith is rooted in *trust* in the reliability of the one trusted. There is no one more trustworthy than God. He always keeps His promises. Abraham knew this.

Our Faith is Rooted in God's Power.

Notice how God is referred to in v. 17. God is *the one who gives life to the dead and calls things that do not exist into existence*. Bringing things to life and His creation of all things are two powerful exhibits of the power of God. Of this, Abraham was firmly convinced. This moved him to believe, *hoping against hope* even when there was no human way for him and Sarah to have a child, 4.19. He did not waver. Instead, he continued to trust God's promise because he knew God had the power to create and bring life.

Abraham Allowed God to be God.

This is a natural transition from recognizing His power to acknowledging His faithfulness. Despite facing his old age and Sarah's infertility, he didn't ignore or underestimate these challenges. Instead, he focused on God's power and faithfulness. *Faith always views problems in light of promises*.

He did not waver in unbelief at God's promise but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God because he was fully convinced that what God had promised, he was also able to do, Romans 4.20-21.

Abraham believed that God could fulfill His promises due to His power and that He would do so because of His faithfulness. He was utterly convinced that God could fulfill what He had promised. As Paul adds, 'his faith was credited to him as righteousness' because he believed in God's promise.

4.23-25: Those Who Trust Like Abraham Are Saved Like Abraham

So, the universal principle of Genesis 15.6 remains evident and straightforward. Christians share the same foundation for justification as Abraham—faith—and have the same God as the object of their faith. In verse 23, Paul says faith is "credited": a belief that stands apart from works, circumcision, the law, and sight. Therefore, this "crediting" is entirely a matter of grace. Our faith not only shares the exact nature as Abraham's but ultimately has the same God as its object, the God "who gives life to the dead" Romans 4.17b.

Abraham's faith in God was not solely about the miraculous creation of life where there was "deadness" but also about fulfilling God's promise to bless the world through him. It is the God of the promise, initially given to Abraham but ultimately realized in Christ and Christians, in whom both Abraham and we have faith. Therefore, even as the focus of faith has evolved throughout salvation history, becoming more apparent with the specific content of the promise, the ultimate object of faith has remained unchanged.

What's In This for Us?

Salvation is by grace through faith: Salvation is not earned through good works, obedience to laws, or religious rituals. It is a gift of God's grace received by faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross. Embrace the system of grace rather than trying to work your way to salvation.

The Righteousness of God: Realize that the righteousness credited to us is not based on our perfect obedience or holiness but on Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross. His death satisfies the requirements of God's law and grants us forgiveness and justification.

God Justifies the Ungodly: We need to grasp better the amazing truth that God justifies the ungodly who trust in Jesus' atonement. We are declared righteous and forgiven through His grace despite our past sins and shortcomings.

Faith Rooted in God's Power: Trust in God's power to fulfill His promises, even when circumstances seem impossible. Like Abraham, believe God can bring life and create solutions amid challenges.

Allow God to be God: Embrace the concept of letting God be God in your life. Recognize His faithfulness and power, and don't waver in unbelief when facing difficulties. View your problems in light of God's promises and give glory to Him.

Conclusion

Romans 4 provides profound insights into the nature of salvation, emphasizing that it is a gift of grace received through faith. It challenges traditional notions of earning salvation through works, rituals, or adherence to a system of law. Instead, it presents a clear contrast between the law system and the grace system. Through the example of Abraham, Paul demonstrates that faith is the key to justification, and it is credited to us as righteousness when we trust in God's promises.

This chapter underscores the universal principle of salvation in Genesis 15:6, which applies to all humanity. It transcends cultural and national boundaries, offering salvation to anyone who believes in God's redeeming work through Christ. As we reflect on the teachings of Romans 4, we are reminded of the power and faithfulness of God. We learn to trust in His ability to fulfill His promises, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. We are encouraged to let God be God in our lives, surrendering to His grace and allowing faith to be the cornerstone of our relationship.

For Class Interaction and Discussion

Lesson Outline:

- Introduction:

- Understanding the contrast between law and grace.

- Romans 4:1-8:

- Abraham's justification by faith apart from works.

- Romans 4:9-12:

- The significance of faith over circumcision.

- Romans 4:13-22:

- The role of faith and law in salvation.

- Romans 4:23-25:

- Applying the principles of faith and grace to our lives.

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. What is the fundamental difference between the system of grace and the system of law, as explained in this lesson?
2. How does Abraham's example challenge the idea of salvation by works or rituals?
3. In what ways does faith play a central role in our justification, as discussed in Romans 4:1-8?
4. Why is it crucial to understand that salvation is available to all, regardless of nationality or cultural background?
5. What does it mean to "let God be God" in our lives, and why is this important in the context of faith and grace?
6. How can we apply the concept of faith rooted in God's power to our daily challenges and struggles?
7. Discuss that righteousness is credited to us as a gift of grace, not based on our merits. How does this impact our view of salvation?

8. What does it mean to have faith as the key that opens the treasure-house of grace?

9. Share examples of how faith has played a transformative role in your life or the lives of those you know.

10. Reflect on Romans 4.23-25. How can we live as those who demonstrate trust and are saved like Abraham?

Group Activities:

1. **Group Discussion:** Divide into small groups and discuss how understanding and embracing grace and faith make a positive difference in the life of a Christian. Have the groups discuss the moments when they trusted God's promises and how this affected their perspective and actions in their spiritual walk.

2. **Timeline of Abraham's Faith:** Create a timeline of critical events in Abraham's life, focusing on moments of faith and trust. Discuss how these moments relate to the lesson's teachings on faith and grace.

Final Encouraging Word:

Just as Abraham believed in God's promises, may we also trust the power and faithfulness of the same God who offers us salvation by grace. Allow this understanding to transform your life and lead you to live as someone who trusts like Abraham and is saved like him.

⁴⁶ Legalism is a framework that emphasizes obedience and views Scripture as a divine set of commands that must be precisely fulfilled. It focuses on external conformity and places the responsibility for acceptance on human response rather than on the work of God. According to a legalistic worldview, the human walk with God is primarily rooted in human action rather than divine grace. Grace is not seen as God's gift to save, but rather as a set of commands that, when followed, can lead to self-salvation, provided that the exact requirements are met.

Legalism is a human-centric approach that emphasizes our actions rather than God's grace. It holds that salvation depends on total obedience to the letter of the law and often displays an excessive concern for minute details while neglecting the spirit of the law. Legalism often refers to those who add a list of do's and don'ts to biblical commands to help prevent a person from violating them. However, in some cases, these take on equal authority with God's commandments and even supersede them. The impact of legalism leads to grave fear that forces people to conform externally, or else they will be lost.

I am indebted to Bobby Valentine for his excellent blog post from 2019 where he attempts to define *legalism*. It is as thorough as any I have seen. See his article called: "Legalism: What Is It?" *StonedCampbellDisciple.com*. July 23, 2019.

⁴⁷ Moser, *Romans*, p. 28.

⁴⁸ Roberts, Mark. *Romans for Everyone*. Bedford, TX. Lower Lights Publications, 2020, p. 53.

⁴⁹ Kercheville, Berry. "Faith Counted as Righteousness." *Focus Magazine*. December 2019. Focusmagazine.org.

⁵⁰ Cairo Damascus Document, 3:2. Quoted by Cottrell, *Romans*.

⁵¹ 1 Maccabees 2.52.

⁵² Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 597.

⁵³ Cottrell, *Romans*, Vol. 1.

⁵⁴ Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All*, p. 323.

⁵⁵ We should never be content with mediocrity or ignore sin. The expectation is that we *avoid sin*, 1 John 2.1. As Christians, God calls us to hate sin and strive to live in holiness, as He is holy. If a person chooses to reject his faith (dependence on God) and walk in darkness, he exits the state of grace.

⁵⁶ Stott, John R. W. *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*. The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001, p. 131.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁵⁸ Cottrell, *Romans*, Vol. 1.