

Believing and Belonging Romans 4:1-17

This text is about **believing** and **belonging**.

Paul has been arguing that we are saved by faith in Christ alone.

He will now **illustrate** this doctrine with the story of **Abraham**. And he will say that all true believers in Christ – whether Jew or Gentile – *belong* to the family of Abraham.

Some of you may have heard this song growing up: **“Father Abraham had many sons, and many sons had father Abraham, and I am one of them and so are you. So let’s all praise the Lord...”**

[Some of you are like, “What?” I grew up on Whitesnake and Bell Biv Devoe (or the Beatles?).]

Scholar Michael Bird says that this children’s song is actually as good summary of this text.

By faith in Christ, we are part of the family of God.

Bird says:

Faith is not just what I assent to; it is also who I belong to. Faith is about family, a Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled, and God-centered family.... Faith is not a privatized affair but is a genuinely family event. God does not save us and then assign us a number until it is time to go to heaven one individual at a time. Rather, God saves us and puts us into his family for the purpose of sharing in the family business of worship and mission... Our sense of identity, purpose, security, and worth is bound up with belonging. The church is the place where that identity, place, security and sense of worth are formed. It is this sense of belonging that enables us to flourish as individuals and even as whole communities.

Believing means belonging, and it is in that experience **that we grow and flourish**.

- **Belonging not just to a group that looks/acts like us; but being sanctified by those not like us – the family of Abraham is diverse!**
- **Example: Andrew Arthur in Seattle – Leader at Amazon and a single mom with a rough history with a bunch of kids, sitting in the room studying Scripture in community, asking different questions, learning, growing together... a beautiful, counter-cultural picture, and a powerful witness of what the gospel produces.**

Paul uses Abraham to support his argument for justification by faith, particularly what the Scripture says about him in **Gen 15:6** – **“Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.”** (also in verses **9, 22**; cf., Gal 3:16, Ja 2:23)

Paul establishes the fact that **the Scriptures have always taught salvation by faith alone**.

He also shows the Jewish folks that **Abraham is on his side**.

- He will argue that Abraham is **proto-typical Christian**.

Romans 4 teaches that all believers are children of Abraham because it is faith that God requires, not works, circumcision, or law-keeping.

Related to **belief**, just scan the page and notice how often Paul talks about “believing” “**faith**” “**being counted righteous**” or “**justification**”

- V. 3 – key verse
- V. 5-6

- 9-12; 13-14
- 16-17
- 22-25 – culmination/application (next week’s sermon)

So justification = being counted righteous in Christ.

Belonging: notice the emphasis on the inclusion of the Gentiles:

- V. 1 “our forefather, according to the flesh” – not according to the Spirit
- V. 9-12 – Abraham is the father of both Jews/Gentiles
- **V 11:** “the father of all who believe”
- **V. 17:** “the father of many nations”

1. Believing: Abraham was counted righteous by faith alone, not by works (4:1-8)

A. The Illustration: Abraham (v. 1)

- To say Abraham was a “big deal” to the Jews would be an understatement (see Jn 8:53).
- A common Jewish understanding was that Abraham was justified by *works* of righteousness.

As one Jewish source, Jubilees 23:10, says: “Abraham was perfect in all his dealings with the Lord and gained favor by his righteousness throughout his life.”

And: “was not Abraham found faithful in temptation, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness?” (in Stott, 123)

The act that got most attention was his sacrifice of Isaac in Gen 22.

Paul argues against this common idea. He argues that Abraham wasn’t justified by works; and he draws attention to God declaring him righteous in Genesis 15.

Abraham’s Story

- i. First, God called Abraham to leave **Ur**, and promised to show him another land, and through him to bless all the peoples on earth (**Gen 11:27ff; 12:1**).
- ii. Second, God identified this the land as **Canaan**, and declaring that though he and Sarai were unable to have children, Abraham’s descendants would actually be as numerous as the stars in the sky (**Gen 13:14; 14:16; 15:5**). **This is before the drugs we have today!**
 - It was by believing this latter promise that Abraham was justified. (**Gen. 15:6**)
- iii. Third, when Abraham and Sarai were old (99-90), God confirmed his promise of a son, changed Abram’s name to Abraham to signify that he would be “the father of many nations,” and gave him circumcision as the sign of his covenant. (**Gen 17:1**)
 - **Guinness Book of World Records** (8’11 dude, most watched cat, oldest person [116], longest fingernails, etc.)
 - **Oldest to have a child?** Lady named Maria in Spain, two twins at age 66.
 - **Well, that’s wrong! How about 90 years old!**
 - **You might also say they also had the most!**

B. The Exposition: Justified by faith not works (2-3)

V. 2: Paul goes on the attack, and does a bit of expository preaching from Gen 15:6.

- Abraham could boast if his right standing had to do with his works.
- But he wasn't righteous based on his works.
- **From God's perspective ("not before God")** he could not boast because **he was not and could not be justified by works.**

V. 3: He quotes Genesis 15:6 to prove it.

- This is a foundational verse – see also **Galatians 3:6**
- **Abraham was a pagan, and God in his grace appeared to him, and Abraham believed and was counted righteous.**
- **"credited"** (*logizomai*) – **five times in six verses** (3-8):
 - An accounting term.
 - **"to account to him a righteousness that doesn't inherently belong to him."**
 - **God granted him the status of "righteous" by faith.**
- This question, **"What does the Scripture say?"** is important for several reasons.
 - It shows that the Bible is **unity**. Paul refers to the whole OT as the Scripture.
 - It shows that the Bible is our **authority**. We must always start here on all matters of faith and practice: What does Scripture say.
- In this case, Paul is saying, "Scripture doesn't teach Abraham was counted righteous by his works! But by faith!"

C. The Application: **By faith God gives us what we didn't/can't earn (4-5)**

V. 4: When we work, and employer gives us a wage **not** as a **gift**, but out of **obligation**.

- If you don't get paid then the employer is being unjust.
- **Example: James working in the yard; "I'll pay you 25cents. What that not fair?"**
- You expect to get paid when you work a job.
- **Salvation isn't based on this work-reward/payment system.**
- God is gracious, and in His grace, he gives us what **we didn't earn** – as a gift.

V. 5: Not only did we not earn righteous, but God gives the gift of righteousness to those who are actually **"ungodly."**

- God justifies **"the wicked."** How about that?!
- Paul puts Abraham in the category of the ungodly!
- This is good news!
- **J.I. Packer, "Nobody can produce new evidence of your depravity that will make God change his mind. God justified you with his eyes open."**
- **He knows it all and by faith he declares us righteous!**
- **It's not like some people just need God to do a little bit, but He has to work extra hard on others! It's not "Jesus paid 20% of it for me" and "80% for him." It's Jesus paid it all!**

"his faith is counted as righteous" – faith unites us to Jesus and being united to him we receive his righteousness. We can't earn it.

D. Biblical Confirmation: **David's Psalm 32. (6-8)**

- Not only does **Abraham** confirm justification by faith, not works; but so does **David**. (cf., Matt 1:1).
- By adding David, Paul is showing how salvation by faith alone is **across redemptive history**.

- Having used a text from *The Law* (Abraham's story in Genesis), he now uses a text from *The Writings* (Psalms) to support his argument.
- David says the same thing in **Psalm 32**: *people whom God credits righteousness apart from works are "blessed."*
- The key point David is that **people who are blessed haven't earned it; but have received it.**
- It is a **gift to have one's sins covered.**
- **God doesn't hold our sins against us; that is a gift!** That is a blessing!

It's important to see that David's Psalm emphasizes the **pardon** element of justification.

- Last week I said that justification means, "**Just as if I've never sinned**" and "**just as if I've always obeyed.**" Well, the former is expressed here.
- Up till now, justification has been about **having the righteousness of God imputed to us.**
- But here he highlights the essential need to **get unrighteousness off of us.**
- **In justification, both are essential: unrighteousness is removed, and righteousness is given to us.**
- **Our sins are *not* reckoned to us, and Christ's righteousness *is* reckoned to us.**
- **Psalm 32:1** – God does not credit our sins to us! Praise God.
- Forgiven, covered, not counted against us!
- And we didn't earn this.

Application: You cannot earn salvation. **Forgiveness and imputed righteousness comes to you only by faith alone.** This text is calling you to believe on the Son.

2. Belonging: Abraham is the father of all who believe (4:9-17)

Now we move to the emphasis on our **vertical** relationship to God, to our **horizontal** relationship with other brothers and sisters – brothers and sisters of all types of ethnicities.

He makes two points in verses 9-17:

- A.** Because justification is by faith alone, not religious ceremony (e.g., *circumcision*), believing Gentiles are part of the family (9-12).
- B.** Because justification is by faith alone, *not by the law*, then believing Gentiles are part of the family (13-17).

A. Because justification is by faith alone, not religious ceremony (e.g., *circumcision*), believing Gentiles are part of the family (9-12).

Circumcision was required to be part of the people of God.

It was important, but Paul makes some important arguments about it here.

9-10: Argument from Chronology: This blessing of acceptance before God is not just for Jewish believers (circumcised) since Abraham was counted righteous before he was circumcised.

- He was declared righteous in Genesis 15:6; and circumcision was introduced in Gen 17.
- **10-15** years before (**29** years later according to some Rabbis)
- **The order is important:** justification then circumcision.
- **He was justified while he was uncircumcised!**

11a: The more Conclusive Point: Why did Paul require it at all?

Alluding to Genesis 17:11, circumcision was a **sign** and a **seal** of the righteousness Abraham had.

It was an external mark. What mattered was the inner reality.

- Circumcision was **not the basis for his right standing before God.**
- It was important, but not the basis.
- It was **a sign of what was already true.**

“**Basis**” is an important word in this entire discussion about justification.

- Unbelievers may do some good things in life – people may do some religious things in life – but those things will never be the basis for justification.
- Indeed, the world would be a better place if people went about doing good things, but they are **never the basis for right standing before God.**

11b-12: The Significance of this argument for the Gentiles: Gentiles who have faith can claim Abraham as their spiritual father; that is, they are part of the family of God too.

- They don't need to be circumcised to be included. (cf., Acts 15)
- Abraham was justified when he was uncircumcised.
- They don't need to become Jewish to become Christians, and part of the family.

In Romans 9, Paul will add some additional thoughts about God's promises to the Patriarchs, but we aren't at that point in his argument yet.

Application: For now, we must see that unity should exist between different ethnicities because we are here by grace alone through faith alone, apart from works, and apart from religious ceremony.

B. Because justification is by faith alone, not by the law, believing Gentiles are part of the family (13-17).

V. 13: “inheriting the world” depends on faith not the law.

In Genesis, the promise of **Canaan** included North, South, East, West of where he was standing (Gen 13:12-17). But here he says that the promise involved being an “heir of the world.”

How did this land become “the world?”

1. It has to do with the **global reach** of the promise – all the families of the earth will be blessed.
2. It has to do with **the Messiah** – it is through Abraham's ultimate offspring, Christ, that all who are in him will “inherit the earth” (**Matt 5:5; 1 Cor 3:21-23**).

Christ, the ultimate offspring, will rule over the world in the future.

1 Cor 3:21-23: All things are yours because you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God. Christ is the heir of God -- **in him** you are fellow-heirs (cf., Rom 8:17, “Heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”)

3. It has to do with **the culmination of the land promise to Abraham.**

Canaan was **a type** of the **new creation** to come.

Often in prophecy there is **escalation**; **the fulfillment is greater than what was originally given.**

This promise to be an heir of the world is based on God's gracious promise received by faith.

- This promise was **not** based on adherence to the **law** but based on **faith**.
- Elsewhere, Paul says that the law was given **430 years** after this promise (see Gal 3:17)
- Here in Romans, he's simply saying that **such an idea is inconsistent with the gospel.**

V. 14: “those who live by the law” = those who base their standing with God on their doing of the Mosaic law.

- If people could inherit the blessing by keeping the law, faith and promise would be worthless.
- **Grace, faith, and promise** are **interlocking concepts**; **law, transgression, and wrath** belong to another system.

V. 15: What the law does:

- The law “brings **wrath**” (15).
- Why does Paul say this: “where there is no law, there is no transgression.”
- **Specific laws make us aware of our sin. And the result? Punishment/wrath.**

Application:

We are given here **two options for one’s eternal destiny**: (1) inherit the **world** through Christ, or (2) inherit **wrath** by trying to earn salvation by the law.

- The difference is **whether or not you will trust in Christ** and receive his righteousness.
- God didn’t say to Abraham, **“Obey this law, and I will bless you forever.”**
- He said, **“Believe this, and I will bless you forever.”**
- God is saying, **“Believe on Christ and you will be saved and blessed forever.”**
- Salvation is by way of **God’s gracious promise, not our good performance.**
- This promise is held out to every tribe, tongue, and people.

16-17: Paul brings together **grace and faith here**, continuing with the same logic.

- **V. 16:** The Greek literally says reads: **“therefore by faith in order that according to grace.”**
- The point is simple: God is gracious, and salvation is a gift of his grace.
- **“Grace gives and faith takes” (Stott).**
- In God’s grace, he makes promises, which we take by faith.

This salvation; this promise; is one that both **Jew and Gentile** can benefit from (“all his offspring”). He mentions both groups:

- (1) “the adherent of the law” (**another way to refer to Jewish Christians**, those who have the law)
- (2) “those who share the faith of Abraham (**Gentile Christians**)

The **law divides** (especially in the cultural and ceremonial practices).

The **gospel** of grace through faith **unites**.

V. 17a: Thus, Scripture is fulfilled (Gen 17:5): “I have made you a father of many nations.”

- Through Christ, Abraham’s great offspring, all believers are part of Abraham’s spiritual family.
- Only justification by grace alone through faith alone could make this a reality.

Application: Justification by faith is not just a doctrine for **individuals**; it’s a doctrine for the **community** of faith. **Believing leads to belonging.**

17b is a transitional statement in which Paul shifts to analyze the **nature** of Abraham’s faith (more next week). He goes on to show that Abraham’s faith is a **model** for all of us.

“in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

- In light of verses 18-20, **“who gives life to the dead”** most likely refers to the miracle of God bringing life out of the “dead womb of Sarah.” He created a nation from this frail, man who was as good as dead.

Hebrews 11:11-12:

¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore

- **“calling into existence the things that do not exist”** – God not only creates the world out of nothing, but gives Abraham and Sarah a child “out of nothing.” He formed a people out of nothing. And he brings us to spiritual life out of nothing.

Abraham/Sarai’s faith in God for a child foreshadows resurrection faith.

- Isaac’s birth may be seen **as a preview of things to come in the resurrection of Jesus.**
- Paul ends this chapter by bringing together those two foundational beliefs: the resurrection and justification by faith. (4:23-25)
- As a result of the resurrection, by faith in Christ we are justified, and are part of the people of God.
- **Ladies and Gentlemen, we put our trust in the all-powerful, life-giving, barrenness-overcoming, miracle-working, death-defeating God of redemptive history!!!**
- We don’t just emulate Abraham; we believe in the life-giving God of Abraham!

What makes trusting someone difficult? Is it not that you find them unreliable? Not trustworthy?

- Well, my friends, this whole chapter is telling us, **God is totally trustworthy and reliable.**
- **Faith involves trusting in God’s divine faithfulness.**
- We begin the Christian life by faith and continue by faith...
- **He always keeps his promise! Trust Him!**

How should this doctrine impact us practically?

Why does Paul spend so much time on the doctrine of justification by faith?

- Well obviously he wants the Romans to know it and believe it.
- But I think there’s more: He wants them to be **shaped by it.**
- He wants the doctrine of justification by faith to **affect their whole lives.**
- As we said before, he is **gospelizing** this church.
- **Luther** said that we must beat the doctrine of justification by faith into our heads. Paul is doing that for several chapters here.
- So my question, **Why? What should this doctrine do in us?**
- What should a believing community look like?

Look back over the text briefly....

1. It should make us a **humble people** because justification by faith undercuts boasting (1-5)

- You don’t have to teach people to boast, we do it naturally.
- **If you overhear middle school boys talking, you will hear them boasting in things that adults are embarrassed to talk about!**
- **Adults express their boastful nature in many ways, including bumper stickers: “Pagan and proud of it!” “My dog is smarter than your child!”**

- **The world of sports is filled with it.**
- **Not only do we do it naturally, we enjoy doing it.**
- **But the gospel redirects our boasting.**
- One of the fruits of the gospel at work in our hearts is that our boast is now **in Christ** – not our performance, our wealth, or wisdom, etc.
- **We learn that the world is not about us – it is about the glory of God in Christ.**
- Life is not about people liking you, or being cool, or making money, or getting short term thrills; it's about the glory of Jesus Christ.
- **And it is in this life of humble worship that you actually find true happiness.**

2. **It should make us a happy people because justification by faith brings the richest of blessings (6-8)**

- This word “**blessed**” is a rich word that carries the idea of joy/happiness, fulfillment, satisfaction.
- The Gospel is good news. Good news should cause you to rejoice!
- **Taking away your boasting doesn't mean taking away joy!**
- It means finding it!
- **What do you think you need to be happy?**
- I need something bigger, better, or more beautiful...
- No, you need a bigger view of the gospel.
- You need to understand the glory of Christ's righteousness imputed to you.

3. **It should make us an obedient people because justification by faith clarifies the proper place of works/obedience (9-11a)**

- We shouldn't dismiss works as unimportant.
- **Romans 1:5** – “the obedience of faith”
- Justification by faith shows us the proper place: it's justification *then* works.
- It's *not the basis* for justification... but the fruit of it.
- Ephesians 2:8-10 gives us that order.
- James is arguing for a faith that functions.
- Paul's example of circumcision reminds us of baptism (though not a one-to-one correlation). Baptism *is a step of obedience*. It's not an elective. It's a commandment. But it follows faith.

4. **It should make us a missional people because justification by faith opens the way for the nations to be part of God's family (11b-12)**

- The Great Commission doesn't start in Matthew 28.
- **From the very beginning God has had a plan for the nations to be blessed through the Messiah.**
- **Justification by faith is a missionary doctrine.**
- It says there's one way of salvation, and that one way is available to the nations – your **ethnicity** is irrelevant.
- We aren't telling people to conform to **American culture or Jewish culture** or any other culture, but to believe the gospel and **live it out in their culture.**
- As Piper notes, **it was difficult for Judaism to be a missionary faith with all of its cultural and ceremonial laws and practices; but Christianity is different.**

- It's a go-tell everyone to simply repent and believe and they will be accepted by God and included into the people of God.
- 5. **It should make us a hope-filled, faith-filled people because justification by faith reminds us of the power and grace of God, and promises us a glorious future as heirs of God (13-17)**
- God's power and grace are evident in this text.
 - God justifies the ungodly by grace.
 - God is the one who gives life to the dead!
- And our future is evident in this text: heirs of the world!
- We should not lose hope because of who God is, what he can do, and what He will do.
 - **UK game last week – after Joshua told me who won I had no hope in the outcome.**
 - We have hope because **we know the end! Jesus wins!**
 - We **must live with the end in mind!**
- We are heirs of the world!
- So let us live with hope in the midst of suffering, and let us be willing to take faith-filled risks because of who God is and because our treasure is not on this earth, but in heaven.