

The Story of Justification by Faith

Romans 4:1-12

November 20, 2022

What does it mean to trust in God? Paul presents a set of rhetorical questions with a fictional Jewish questioner in order to prove that justification and righteousness with God is solely by faith. Faith is reliant trust that abandons fleshly works of achievement and rests solely on God's grace to receive righteousness from God through Christ Jesus.

We will see this through the two stories that Paul taps into: The story of the flesh and the story of faith.

Read.

Intro: In God We Trust (4:5) A national motto on our American dollars and coins, and on our Alabama license plates.

What is trusting in God? What does it look like? What is the activity of the heart that truly trusts God?

Romans goes deep and strong into how our righteousness comes from God, not from ourselves.

The heart (the seat, the central animating disposition) of the person is what matters most, not the works of the person. Works flow from faith, after faith, as Paul proves here.

Paul giving a Q&A tour on this topic of how someone is made righteous before God. How is someone made right with God? How does someone find purpose for their life? He is answering the question of what it means to trust in God.

And so, he tells the two stories, the two familiar stories of the Bible and of every human life: Which story will you make your own? Which story will own you? This is not a new story, which Paul proves by taking us to Father Abraham and to King David, and this is not a new story for most of us, but we all need renewal in this story, so lean in and take this in.

Paul proving how justification happens by faith. He uses this Q&A format to lay it out in the simplest of terms. Why? b/c justify by faith is anti-work and the natural human heart is pro-work.

1The story of the flesh –

v. 1-2 > What about Abraham? justification by works gives reason to boast (before men, not God!) The way of the flesh is boasting, bragging, comparing, judging, condemning, competing, anger, envy, jealousy, dissensions.

v. 4 > wages are due the worker. If works are what matter as far as our justification, then we can earn our salvation, earn God's favor by working, striving, accomplishing, doing, making it happen.

And the story of the Bible and the story of humanity is that this is the human heart and even though it fails to infinity and beyond our human nature is to double down. This is the way of the flesh.

ILLUS > mercy ministry situation – *Joanne Lafitte* – the way this person lived kept bringing harm upon them, yet they kept doing it. Won't you abandon yourself to Jesus?

v. 9 would be a challenging question for any Jewish person. To even consider that the blessing of forgiveness could be for the uncircumcised would be very difficult for them to believe.

v. 9 – who is the forgiveness and atonement and cleansing and freedom and rescue from God's wrath for? Those who have the ethnically distinguishing mark? Or is it for everyone who responds to God's promises with faith, belief, trust?

The way of the flesh leads to ethnic pride, tribalism, the kind of religion that separates and divides and causes pride through blood & soil identity, (for example, we lament the way the Russian Orthodox Church has fallen for this by supporting the Russian government's war of aggression to conquer territory for the state) The way of the flesh is grabbing, getting, achieving, acquiring (by the way, v. 11 proves that the act of baptism itself does not save anybody)

v. 9 still relevant today – are you born into your religion? In many parts of the world, yes. Does your ethnicity determine your standing with God? Do your actions? If I follow these rules and rituals and ceremonies, then I'm good.

The fleshly nature is very strong, very resistant. As an illus of this...

ILLUS of the battle for justification by faith alone in the 16th century. We don't live in the past, but we are affected by it, and history is good at repeating itself. RC Sproul: "...[N]o doctrinal dispute has ever been contested more fiercely or with such long-term consequences as the one over justification. There were other ancillary issues debated in the 16th century, but none so central or so heated as this.

We know how Martin Luther felt about the controversy. He called justification by faith alone "the article upon which the church stands or falls."

Bridge to 2: And so God's Word calls us to examine ourselves. Are we still in the flesh?

v.1 - The story of the flesh regarding generational inheritance of the faith. Yes, we believe in covenant theology – that each Christian family is a covenant community through which God's mercy is passed to one another - but each one in the family must personally take this in.

Children and youth, you know you are sinners: embrace Jesus by faith, by trusting Him, by giving yourselves completely to Him, and beware of falling for the evil trap of calling yourselves Christians just because your parents are – you must make Christ your own by

faith, not by your behavior – not by being good enough on your own. You know the difference. Your conscience is telling you right now. Come to Jesus and repent of any fakery.

Paul contrasts the story of the flesh with the story of faith:

2The story of faith –

The story of Abraham

Faith is a response to the promises

Gen 11-25, and espec Gen 15:6 (v. 3 is a direct quote)

Thielman: “Ab in Gen 15:6...there is no mention of work, only of reliance on the generosity of God and of God’s willingness, surprisingly, to count that reliance as righteousness.”

Counted or credited - “counted to him as righteousness”

Counted used 7 times in this passage – an accounting or bookkeeping term – money – we know if we are getting a credit into our account, or a debit taken away from our account. Paul showing us that faith is the anti-work that credits our account. This goes completely against the story of the flesh.

He is tracing our spiritual fatherhood back to faith. Faith is reliance. Paul saying that by following in the footsteps of our father Abraham, he is our father, too. He is the Gentiles’ father. What this means is that Christianity is the most socially unifying and ethnically diverse system of belief in the world.

Therefore, all Christians equally have everything, everything, everything given and apprehended by faith. We have access to God, adoption from God, rewards from God, and more by faith alone.

This also means that in our flesh, we are all diminishing, becoming less-- decreasing in the flesh while the spirit is ever increasing as we apprehend, gather in, and rejoice. Is there anything to compare to this? Is there anything as welcoming, inviting, and worth feasting upon?

Implications of the one who is counted righteous apart from works: Think of the beautifully gifted athlete or the beautifully gifted cheerleader. I mean the one that can’t help it. Gifted and everyone knows it. But so often these are hated and ostracized and urged into shrinking back into the shadows of average and mediocrity because of the pain of being gifted.

Now, extrapolate this out. This is all of you who are in Christ. You are like Abraham – incredibly gifted with the gift of faith that makes you apprehend the Giver. This is the difference. You apprehend, you take it in, you receive the gift and this makes you different b/c it makes you both radically humble and strongly confident. Hey, um, I didn’t ask for these gifts! I’m just taking them up and working with what I’ve been given.

So whether you are the beautifully gifted athlete or the beautifully gifted autistic or the beautifully gifted cheerleader or the beautifully gifted musician all you do is walk in the footsteps of the gifts that have been given to you. This is the immense power of the Christian gospel that Paul is unpacking week by week for us. (going back to 3:24 again and again “justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”)

Just as for the beautifully gifted, is there a potential for jealousy, hatred, ostracization? Yes.

But don't you see? The gifts that come from God are inextinguishable. Your gift of faith is inexhaustible, immovable, inextinguishable. Live. Live by faith. We are not those who shrink back. We are not those who slink back into the din of mediocrity or average-ness because that leads into the devil's trap of going along to get along, or worse, presuming upon God's grace and turning lazy and ineffective for the kingdom. We rise above all of that b/c of what we have been given. We can't help it.

Like Eric Liddell's famous quote about running so fast and well that he won an Olympic gold from the movie *Chariots of Fire*: “when I run I feel His pleasure.” When you live by faith, you feel His pleasure. Of course! Because you are in Christ now and forever and the Father is well pleased with His son and with his daughter, which is you who are His by faith.

Now, is this attacked? Yes, of course, which is proof that you have been given gifts. Is it hard to believe? Yes. Which is why we need to read it and hear it again and again.

As Brad preached last week: Can you receive this? Can you die to achieving? Make no mistake, it is a death, and an ongoing death – this is why repentance is a lifestyle for the Christian, not a one-time thing. Luther's first thesis. “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” He intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.”

But look at the reward: v. 7 and 8

This is not too good to be true. Can you feel it here in what Paul writes and the way he writes? It's not too good to be true. It is the gift of God, so that no one may boast.

ILLUS: Think of Thanksgiving this week – gifts given and received and out of the overflow of abundance we share these gifts with one another. A test this week: Can you receive the abundance and rest in Your Father's care? So that you and your household become a hospitality center, not an entertainment center. It's about overflowing what you have been given instead of showing off what you can give others. And this takes all the pressure off, all the pressure off. Rest in your gifts and this is what it means to live by faith.

Paul's point > If Abraham believed God, and David believed God (meaning that they trusted God's word and put their faith in His word), then you Romans and all who read and hear this letter, you too must abandon hope in any good work or in being good

people and surrender to God's way of salvation. Paul is saying - this is nothing new what I am writing to you. Justification by faith. Righteousness by faith. Secure and complete standing with God by faith that comes by grace as a gift that comes through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (3:24).

Another angle to help this sink in:

For any good story, you have to have conflict. Something has to go wrong for the right to be right. And so, for the story of faith to happen to us, for us to be IN the story, we have to have these plot lines that Paul is giving us - you have to have these non-negotiables to make the story happen – And you have them, all of us have them. FLESHLY BELIEF and UNBELIEF.

FLESHLY BELIEF: My way is the only way I can even begin to consider. It makes sense to my flesh to work for my own righteous standing, my own salvation, my own rescue, my own purpose in life. To achieve. If this is your animating disposition, you are consumed with pride and fear and may not even know it. Defensiveness is a prime characteristic of fleshly belief.

UNBELIEF: Refusal to believe in God's Word and way. His Word promises forgiveness (Psalm 32) and His Way is through the blood atonement of Jesus.

How to get away from these? How to fight against these imposters to the good life? The key is repentance attached to your faith. (Repentance is not mentioned in this passage...) But Paul mentions 'the ungodly' in v. 5 and 'sins' in v. 7 and 8.

So for Paul, for the Protestant Reformers, for us... the ongoing fight is for grasping, knowing, believing, being overwhelmed by the stupendous ridiculousness of what Luther called alien righteousness. (outside of ourselves)

****What, you mean I have nothing to do? You mean I do nothing? Believing is not nothing. But it is an anti-work. Faith is your anti-work. What does this mean?**

****Faith that apprehends Jesus, that looks to Jesus, that fights back against shame and condemnation and not being enough is your attack against works being your measuring tool.**

Circumcision was not nothing. But it was done after the believing. In response to the believing. Works are done in obedience to faith as a fruit of the obedience of faith. Repentance and faith propel obedience. We don't work FOR our justification; we work (do good works) FROM our justification. (This is James.)

How? How can I take this in? By seeing the promises and pounding them into your soul to hack at the evil that rises so quickly, the evil of unbelief and fleshly belief. What do we fear? We fear surrender. We fear giving ourselves over that completely.

And so Jesus, the Great Physician, brings things into our lives to force us either to Him or to despair. Either to Him or to Dragon Pride. Either to Him or to unbelief. He will not tolerate both and for Abraham, so that he would never forget, he ordered up circumcision as a glimpse of the pain required for sin to be paid for.

For us, He went to the cross so that we would see the cross and remember the pain, the torture, the blood, the rejection, the abandonment, the shame, the bloody, gory consequences of our FLESHLY BELIEF and UNBELIEF and be shaken by it. Because unless the cross moves you at an emotional and spiritual level, have you really apprehended it? (this could be conclusion?)

Conc: In God We Trust. In God I Trust. In God's Way I Trust. His Story is Mine. My Story is His. I belong to Him. I surrender to being in His Story instead of making Him part of mine.

The difference that makes all the difference. It's not about what I have done or do. Otherwise, God owes you something. It's about what I receive that has already been done.

"It is the main design of the ministry of the gospel, to prevail with men to give up themselves unto the Lord Christ, as He reveals His kindness...." (John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, (1657) 2.3, p. 154.)

That is what Paul is doing, what I am doing, what the Spirit is doing here as He pleads with us all – take this in – faith alone in what Jesus has done is what counts as righteousness with God.

Bene: Romans 1:7