

GOD JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY

Romans 4:1–12

Key Verse: 4:5

“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...”

If you had to rate your spiritual condition right now on a scale of one to ten, what would you say? On a good day, we might say “seven” or “eight”—we’re doing the right things, reading the Bible, praying, and avoiding the big sins. But deep down, do you ever worry your spiritual life is built on a lie? That if God were to suddenly expose who you are, your performance wouldn’t be enough? Accepting the gospel in Romans helps us see ourselves differently.

To get this, we need to understand the curious structure of Romans. For the first three chapters, Paul rigorously describes and proves our sinfulness before God, whether we’re religious or not (1:18–3:20). Then, with precise language, Paul says that the just God gives us his righteousness in Jesus as a gift, apart from any of our good works, if we just receive it by faith (3:21–4:25). Only after that does Paul describe the fruits of faith in Jesus and the process of sanctification we need (chapters 5–8). Why does he write like this?

We all would love to live in a beautiful, updated house. But if the house’s foundation is bad, it’s time to run—all the rest of it is not worth buying. Likewise, there’s no sense in discussing the fruits of Christian life or how we can grow in holiness if our gospel foundation isn’t strong and clear. In Romans, Paul is sharing the gospel as a skilled master builder, first working carefully on the foundation (1 Cor. 3:10). If we don’t know how serious sin is, or how sinful we are before God, we have a weak gospel foundation. If we’re not aware of how self-righteous and spiritually arrogant we are before God, we have a weak gospel foundation. If we can’t see how much we’re relying on our own works, our own discipline or effort to be right with God, we have a weak gospel foundation. If we don’t fully grasp the greatness of God’s gift to us in Jesus, we have a weak gospel foundation. If our faith is not clearly in the person of Jesus and what he’s done for us, we have a weak gospel foundation. So far, how’s your foundation?

Paul begins his next section—God’s solution to our sin—by using some powerful verbs. He says, “But now the righteousness of God *has been manifested...*” (3:21). He says that “all,” everyone, “*is justified* by his grace as a gift...” (3:23–24). He says God “*put forward*” Jesus “as a propitiation by his blood...” (3:25a). Finally he says, “For we hold that one *is justified...*” (3:28a). In less than ten verses, this string of four powerful verbs emphasizes not what *we* need to do, but what *God has already done for us in Jesus* to make us righteous. Honestly, we’re not very comfortable with only receiving what someone else has done for us. But if we won’t humbly receive what Jesus has done, the painful truth is, we’re not yet a Christian.

This ties in to what Paul has been saying. If we refuse to admit and repent of our arrogant ingratitude, idolatry, and perversion, we’re not ready to receive the blood of Jesus by faith. If we refuse to admit and repent of our spiritual pride, self-righteousness, and judging others, we’re not ready to receive the blood of Jesus by faith. If we’re not open to just trusting our Sovereign God, who designed this very Gospel as his most beautiful gift to us, we’re not ready to receive the blood of Jesus by faith. Are you truly ready to receive his blood by faith? At the beginning of Romans, Paul said that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written: “The righteous shall live by faith” (1:17). After establishing the foundation of our sinfulness and of what God has done for us in Jesus, Paul now digs more deeply into the nature of this faith.

In chapter 4, he gives one main example: Abraham, our father of faith (1, 11, 12, 16–18; cf. Gal. 3:7, 29). It’s good to read all of chapter 4 in one setting, to begin to grasp all the aspects of his faith. But Paul divides this chapter into two main sections: how God “counted” Abraham’s faith as righteousness (1–12), and more of the quality of his faith that we all need to learn and apply (13–25). Today we’ll study the first half of chapter 4, “God Justifies the Ungodly,” in four parts: Part 1: A Witness on the Stand (1–3); Part 2: A Legal Shift—From Debt to Credit (4–5); Part 3: A Corroborating Witness (6–8); and Part 4: A Chronology of Grace (9–12). May God speak to us through his word.

Part 1: A Witness on the Stand (1–3)

Let’s read verses 1–3. In explaining gospel faith, why start with Abraham as a witness? As we’ve seen, Paul’s been addressing Jews, and they’ve been having problems with the gospel. They want to rely on their chosen status, their

great knowledge of the law, and their own great works, their own righteousness. They think Paul's gospel of grace is dangerous, even silly (3:5–8). So what better person to begin explaining the gospel than Abraham? Abraham was legendary, and still is, for so many people around the world. His faith in God shines as a beautiful example. He left everything to obey God's call. He risked everything to protect his nephew Lot. He sacrificed his best when he was ready to offer his son Isaac. But Paul doesn't highlight any of this. What's he doing?

Read verse 2 again. Paul just mentioned that in the gospel all boasting is excluded (3:27). Now he uses Abraham as an example of being justified by faith, not by works. He doesn't elaborate on Abraham's "works" that are nothing to boast about; he assumes we're familiar with his story. So, what is Abraham's story? Honestly, it's a story of chronic failure. When God first calls him, he goes to the promised land, but as soon as a famine hits, he flees to Egypt in fear and lies that his wife is his sister. Only with God's intervention does he get out of that impossibly awkward situation. Then, after he rescues his nephew Lot and gives a tithe, he falls into depression because he's still got no heir of his own and starts complaining to God. Despite having God's promise for a son from his own body, he rationalizes and gives in to his wife's idea to take a concubine, Hagar, which produces another hot mess, which only God can resolve. Then, after taking a 13-year spiritual vacation, God calls him again and promises his wife Sarah will bear him a son. But Abraham laughs in disbelief. And even after he goes through with the covenant of circumcision, he falls into fear of powerful people and lies about his wife again; and again, only God's intervention protects them. So, from beginning to end Abraham keeps failing. How can he possibly be an example?

Read verse 3 again. Paul often refers to Genesis 15:6 in this chapter (4–6, 9–10, 23–24). For Paul, it's the pivotal moment in Abraham's life, when he became the example of faith for us all. God invited him to come outside his tent, where he'd been complaining, look up at the heavens, and count the stars. When he did, the vividly real glory and power of God melted his heart, and the promise of God drove out his fatalistic thinking and disappointments. This moment of faith changed everything. He didn't do anything epic; he simply believed God's promise, and God counted him as righteous. It's a timeless lesson: Believing God means really believing his word of promise. Believing God's promise made Abraham righteous, right with God, no longer crooked towards him. Our sins and

failures can make us fatalistic, hopeless, and crooked. But simply believing God's promise to us in Jesus makes anyone today right with God.

Part 2: A Legal Shift: From Debt to Credit (4–5)

Did Abraham deserve this new status God gave him? Not at all. After his foolish unbelief and complaining, he deserved to be dumped. But when God helped him believe his promise, he also gave him righteousness as a gift of grace. To help us see what this means, Paul repeats the word "count" in this chapter eleven times (3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24). He's describing a legal accounting transaction. The Greek word means to calculate something precisely, determine it by a concrete, mathematical process, take all factors into consideration, then officially come to hold a view about a person. We human beings get caught up in thinking about what we or others deserve. But the gospel radically changes our calculus. Through faith, God took Abraham from a debtor to a creditworthy person. How did that happen? God canceled Abraham's debt of sin, and credited him with righteousness. Still, it's not so easy to grasp.

So Paul puts it plainly. Let's read verse 4. People who work hard think they should get what they are due, the due payment for their long, hard hours. Some have an absurd entitlement mentality, but usually, those who do nothing think they deserve nothing. Yet in the gospel of Jesus, we all go from debtors to creditworthy—people with the great debt of sin we could never pay back, to people with the greatest credit, "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). Are you kidding me? How can this be real?

Imagine a young person who's lived recklessly, maxing out all kinds of credit cards and running up hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. His financial record is a complete disaster; his credit score has plummeted to the bottom. No one will approve him for a loan or even rent him an apartment. Financially speaking, he's "ungodly," crushed under a debt he can never pay back. One morning, he walks into a high-stakes meeting with a forensic auditor, terrified of collections. Instead of pulling out a bill, the auditor smiles and shows him the screen. First, the massive debt is completely wiped out. The balance reads exactly \$0.00—someone else has paid all his debt in full. But the auditor doesn't stop there. He clicks another button and says, "Now, we are transferring a permanent, perfect 850 credit score into your name, along with a massive deposit of several million dollars. This isn't a loan, it's a permanent credit." The

young man stammers, "But... I didn't do anything to deserve this. I need to get to work to earn this." The auditor stops him: "If you try to work for this, you're treating it like a wage. But this is a gift. The only thing left for you to do is go live like a wealthy, free person." This is exactly what Paul is describing. Most of us walk into God's presence trying to clean up our spiritual credit score through good deeds, hoping God will say, "Good job, I owe you." We want our standing to be a wage. But the gospel tells us that our spiritual credit score is in absolute ruin. We are bankrupt. And God himself has done something about it.

Let's read verse 5. In this one verse, Paul says something amazing about God: God justifies the ungodly. He clears our entire bad record and makes it right. Isn't that unfair? Paul already explained it: When the Father put forward his one and only Son as the propitiation by his blood, he paid for all our sins, past, present, and future, and thus, he himself remains just (3:25b–26). When we receive his gift of grace through his redemption in Jesus, he forgives all our sins. This is a truth people often miss about God: God works to justify the ungodly. He longs to redeem, forgive, and restore, and he made it possible for anyone in Jesus. Jesus is the universal solution for the universal human problem of sin. No one can add anything else to God's perfect solution; we just need to receive it. When we do, God counts our faith as righteousness, just as he did Abraham.

And there's one more important thing. When we begin to have faith, God doesn't change his view of us—we change. God didn't change his mind about Abraham; he simply applied to him a pre-planned legal adjustment. God wiped out his debt of sin and credited him with his gift of righteousness, which Abraham received by faith. And even Abraham's faith was not something he could boast about; it was God's gift to him (Eph. 2:8–9). Theologically, it's called "imputed righteousness." It means crediting one person's account with the benefits that justly belong to another. What God did for Abraham is only a shadow of what he does for us in Jesus. God gives us the gift of faith in Jesus' death and resurrection (24–25), then credits us with the perfect life, the perfect death, the very righteousness of Christ. It's sheer grace, and God gets all the glory.

Part 3: A Corroborating Witness (6–8)

Following the Jewish principle of needing at least two witnesses to prove the truth of a matter (Deut. 19:15), Paul adds one here. Let's read verses 6–8. This quotation is from one of David's most famous psalms, Psalm 32. He wrote it

after he repented of his two greatest sins: his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, his loyal general Uriah. David tried to hide his sins, but in the Bible, they're plainly revealed and their consequences described in painful detail. Yet David, too, experienced the truth that God justifies the ungodly. When God confronted him with his sin through the prophet Nathan and helped him repent, David said, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:13a). Psalm 32 seems to have been written after David heard the words, "The Lord also has put away your sin" (2 Sam. 12:13b). David experienced the best blessing, the greatest happiness, of God's forgiveness. There's nothing else like it.

Let's read verses 6–8 again. Just as God counts us with righteousness by his grace, so he also refuses to count our sins against us. As the psalmist wrote: "...as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12). The prophet Jeremiah said of God: "For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34b). It points to the day when God would forgive all our sins in Jesus. Through what Jesus suffered for us, God completely, permanently deletes all the records of our sin. As someone famously said, through Jesus, God dumps all our sins into the depths of the sea and puts up a sign there, "No Fishing Allowed." Wow, God who justifies the ungodly even "forgets" our sin! The Jews had an extremely high view of the heroes in their history, Abraham and David. They took great pride in them. They were always remembering their greatness. But in fact, both of them were terrible sinners. Both experienced God's amazing grace. It's the same grace from the same God reaching out to all the ungodly Gentiles through Paul's ministry. It's the same grace of the same God who wants to justify the most ungodly people today. We can understand and welcome the gospel of Jesus when we understand God's nature, that God justifies the ungodly through faith. It's something God still wants to do, if we'd just open our hearts and mouths and share this good news with people today.

Part 4: A Chronology of Grace (9–12)

In this last part, Paul does two things. He clarifies that Abraham was fully justified by faith before he was circumcised (9–10). It's to further prove that God justifies the ungodly apart from the works of the law (5). It's truly a "Chronology of Grace." Then he shows that God's gracious gift of justifying the ungodly is for the uncircumcised, all those living far off, strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world—if they only believe his gift of grace

in Jesus (Eph. 2:13–14). Paul is consistently defending his Gentile ministry. Even more, he's doing his best to open the narrow minds of his own people to see the glorious new thing God yearns to do in the world today.

So, how would you rate your spiritual condition now? Are you like an ostrich, burying your head in the sand to ignore the reality of your life's foundation? Are you uncontrollably racking up spiritual debts? Are you living in self-righteous arrogance, always trying to prove you're right? Or, are you simply trusting God who justifies the ungodly through faith in Jesus? If you are, your spiritual condition is as good as it gets, a perfect 10. This is our only secure foundation: our righteousness comes not from our performance, but only from our faith in Jesus. Let's ask God to give us this gift of faith in Jesus and know for sure that we are justified, fully forgiven. And let's ask God to help us see the ungodly with hope, and empower us to share the grace of Jesus with them.