

"The Gift of Righteousness" Romans 4:1–8

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[0 : 00] Follow along will be on Romans chapter 4.! Nearing the end of his time in office, President Joe Biden issued a full pardon to his son Hunter Biden for some pretty serious crimes.

There is commuting of sentences and pardoning of offences for political friends.

Now we don't have the exact same situation in Canada, probably a good thing. Nevertheless, our justicism is not perfect. We have kind of an interestingly similar situation whereby we credit convicted felons, those that have been convicted of serious crimes, with 1.5 years time served for every year, or sorry, 1.5 days rather, for every day that they are held in pre-sentence custody.

Now, I don't know if you knew this, I'm not a lawyer, if I'm getting something wrong, alright? Bit of grace. Even more, sometimes convicted offenders are given conditional discharge.

Maybe they plead guilty to a lesser crime, so that no jail time is imposed at all. Now, I don't want to debate the legitimacy of this practice, or talk about whether our justice system is needing reform or not.

[1 : 43] I bring up this point, these two points, simply to say that just because something is legal doesn't necessarily make it morally just.

Allowing guilty people to walk free by crediting them with time they did not serve, or by giving them a completely blank slate of pardon, it doesn't exactly scream justice, does it?

In fact, it kind of screams the opposite, a miscarriage of justice. If this is the case, if you're feeling kind of the way I do, this is maybe a bit of a frustrating aspect to our justicism.

I, again, I'm not trying to debate the legitimacy of justice reform or how things are, but just the fact that guilty people are given time served for time they didn't end up serving, and they get to walk free.

If this is truly a miscarriage of justice, as we go into Romans chapter 4, we are put in a bit of a dilemma. After making an airtight case, it's been a couple weeks now since we've been in Romans, so it might be a bit, your memory might be a bit foggy, but making an airtight case at the complete unrighteousness of humanity from Romans chapter 1, verses 18, all the way to chapter 3, verse 20, Paul turns to the topic of righteousness and how mankind can enjoy it.

[3 : 20] And he uses this term throughout this chapter, and especially in verses 3 and 8 of chapter 4, he talks about accredited righteousness or an imputed righteousness, which sounds like, at least with first reading, that God is letting people off scot-free, or he's giving them time served.

And if that's the case, then I think we need to wrestle with the fact that God might be engaging in a miscarriage of justice. Or at least, let's ask that question. Let's be a bit of a devil's advocate in this regard.

Does God issue presidential pardons? Does he merely pronounce a judgment, but ultimately people don't have to serve any degree of time in jail?

It's an important question. I think it's a question we need to walk towards and wrestle with as we enter into Romans chapter 4.

A righteous and holy God who is perfect in every way, how does he allow salvation to happen to guilty people? That's the big question for us this morning.

[4 : 44] So, we're going to turn to Romans chapter 4. We're going to consider this topic by looking at one of the greatest figures in Old Testament history, the patriarch of patriarchs. If there was a drummer, it would be a drum roll.

Abraham. He is the father of the faith. He is righteous. He is the exemplar of faith in the Old Testament. His faith is not in question, both from a biblical standpoint and the Jewish tradition. And we're going to look at this belief of Abraham. And through it, we're going to ask how God's righteousness can be credited by faith apart from works.

And then we're going to ask the question, how can he refuse then to credit our sin against us? So, on one hand, God's righteousness is credited by faith apart from works.

And on the other hand, God refuses to credit our sin against us. So, if you have a scripture journal, page 20, we're going to read verses 1 and 2. What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather, according to the flesh?

[5 : 50] For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. Pause really quickly. It's helpful for us to remember that Paul, he is addressing a mixed congregation.

We talked about this the first week of our time in Romans. Romans, Rome, even though Paul wasn't there, he has a lot of affection for this congregation. He is writing to the Roman church after the expulsion of Jews from Rome, and then the lifting of that expulsion so that the Jews have come back.

So now the church is wrestling with its identity. It is both Gentile and Jewish. And how, then, do we embrace the biblical faith? How do we live in harmony and fellowship with one another?

The question Paul here, then, is addressing is a very important one. And he is asking the question in a bit of a hypothetical sense.

Whether, actually, maybe it's not hypothetical, but likely it is. Whether it's hypothetical or not, the question persists, and it goes something like this. Surely the righteousness of God given through Jesus is good.

[7 : 05] And maybe it's even great. But what about the law? What about the law keepers? If there are the Jewish people in the congregation, they would say something like, but what about us law keepers?

God has given us the law, and the law brings righteousness. So then where is the place of Jesus in this? And then, I guess, a secondary question. Is there two separate tracks of salvation?

Okay, one through Jesus, and then one through Jesus plus the law. How does this work out? Paul frames this question by asking the question simply by going to Abraham, who is the father.

Now, I'll just say this. Verses nine, he is setting this up so that he can get to verse nine and following, where he's going to talk about circumcision and what it means to be a true son of Abraham.

Now, we're not going to get there. If you'd see in the liturgy booklet, the reading was originally supposed to go to verse 12. But there's a lot to unpack in verses one to eight. So we're going to actually touch on verses nine and following next week.

[8 : 14] But Paul really is setting up this question of how then are we to understand faith? And in light of faith, how are we to understand the place of Abraham and being the father of faith that he is, but both to the father of Jews and to Gentiles.

But here, Paul is really addressing this question about the nature of righteousness. So he frames this question by asking first about boasting.

If Abraham was justified before God through his good works of keeping the law, Paul is saying he would have a case of, sorry, a claim to his own salvation, or at least an aspect of it.

But this isn't the case at all. How can Paul say this? Again, Abraham is the father of the faith. He is the one that Jewish people were to emulate. And at this time, a tradition was developing whereby Abraham, even though he was the father of faith, that it wasn't so much the faith that justified him or made him right with God, but that he was almost like a proto-law keeper.

Okay? The law hadn't yet been given. Nevertheless, Abraham was the one who would keep the law. But Paul says not at all. In fact, Abraham is the father of the faith.

[9 : 38] Why? Because he simply believed God and the righteousness that God gave him was based not on what he did, but what he believed and in who he believed in.

This is what Paul is saying here in verse 3. And this is what he says. For what does God, sorry, what does the scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

I'll just pause really quickly here. Because Paul, he appeals to the very words of God of scripture. Paul, in other places, to the Athenians in Acts, he is going to appeal to philosophy.

He's going to appeal to rhetoric and logic. He is going to point to the pantheon of gods. He's going to meet people where they're at. In this case, he is appealing to scripture.

And it is not just because the Jewish people would have held on to scripture as the ultimate authority, but there is so much at stake here when it comes to what true biblical faith is.

[10:42] He appeals to the highest authority. So we see in verse 3, for what does the scripture say? Paul then quotes Genesis chapter 15, where God promises Abraham in his extreme old age.

Again, Abraham is very, very elderly. That he would have innumerable offspring, even though at the time of the promise, he had none. And the likelihood of him having children in a natural way was almost certainly zero.

Why? Because his wife, Sarai, who would later become Sarah, she was also very, very, very elderly. Their time had passed.

They were a barren couple. Yet Abraham believed that God would bless him because God said he would. Abraham believed God and God counted to him his belief in God's salvation, which is what we have in mind here, what Paul has in mind here.

He counted to him as a righteous man. That when God looked at Abraham because of his faith, he deemed him or counted him or imputed to him a righteousness.

[11:59] And this is where we encounter the first of the many references to this term counted. So in the English Standard Version, which we're using here, it will use the word counted or counts.

And if you go through chapter four, it's used numerous times. And in our section, verses three to eight, it's used five times. So it's important for us to get a handle on what it means.

For Paul, he is using this term. It's a financial word or an accounting word to describe how Abraham is made righteous or justified before God because of the faith that is credited to his account, so to speak.

The term is used to describe money or credit, being credited to an account that comes about in two separate ways.

The first, very simply, is that funds are credited or imputed to one's account because they've worked for it, they've earned it. You work, you are owed pay, you are paid.

[13:12] The worker is deserving of her wages, the man has earned his pay, the money is credited to his account. But there's a second way it is used, and that is to talk about a gift.

Something unearned or undeserved and therefore cannot be demanded or boasted about. This is what Paul is getting at in verse two. A gift is given because the giver wants to give.

The giver, he or she is not under obligation to give. The giver wants to give simply because they desire to. Or maybe it's a situation where the creditor wipes out the account owing, not again because they're compelled to, but as an act of kindness.

The individual who is no longer a debtor or the recipient of the gift cannot boast somehow about not having read in the ledger or having this wonderful gift that they have.

They have simply received. And the proper way to receive is with thankfulness. So on one hand, there's this credited term that describes wages earned and also gifts received.

[14:26] And it would seem to me, and what Paul is getting at, is that these two ways of looking at the term credited, they are exclusive to one another.

A wage isn't a gift. A gift isn't deserved. What happened to Abraham wasn't righteousness credited to him as his due, but rather a gift from God because God wanted to give it.

So verses four and five really hammer this home. Read with me verses four and five. Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as his due.

And to the one who does not work, but believes in him, and presumably this him is God, who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

So we see that the righteousness that Paul is envisioning here, appealing to scripture, appealing to Genesis 15, is a gift given by God, imputed or counted to Abraham because of his faith.

[15:33] Paul says in verse five that it is the ungodly that are justified by God, not the godly, but the ungodly, which is to say that even if we had the option of working for our salvation, it would ultimately be a futile effort because how can the ungodly ultimately have some kind of divine righteousness that would please the godly God?

God. Or the eternal God. The gift of righteousness is just that. It is a gift. And friends, this is the heart of the gospel.

This is what the reformers would call the great exchange. We give Christ our sin. We literally impute it to him. We credit Christ.

We, God, takes our sin, credits it to Christ. So God looks at Christ and it says in scripture that he was numbered with the transgressors.

So God looks at Christ in this great exchange and he doesn't necessarily see the righteousness, the purity, the perfection, the moral uprightness, the divine faithfulness.

[16:47] Instead, he sees our sin. And then in this exchange, what does God do? He imparts to us, imputes to us, credits us with the very righteousness of Christ so that he looks at us and he doesn't see the sin and the hangups and the constant abuse that we hurl at others or receive from others.

Instead, God himself, he sees the righteousness of Christ. This is the great exchange. But returning to the opening question about a miscarriage of justice.

In a way, does this not seem unjust? I guess maybe this isn't exactly the best way to steel man it, but I think it's a good way to put it. To ask in a critical way.

Is it simply that we believe in God? In some kind of way we have a faith in God and that gets us out of jail?

This rescues us from hell? We can avoid eternal damnation but enjoy eternal bliss forever just because we believe?

[18:03] I mean, it seems almost too good to be true. What about our punishment? Does this not make the free gift of God's justification seem a bit too free?

Does this not make it a bit scandalous? Years ago, I was connected to a ministry just through some friends in Toronto where they would do a neighborhood clothing giveaway.

And very soon after they would give away these clothes, good quality clothes from donors. They would go through and make sure there's no rips or tears or stains.

They put an end to the free giveaway right away because the free gift was so quickly abused by the people. People would come first thing and they would just scoop up armfuls of clothes or bring garbage bags and stuff them to the brim.

The way they got around this is they charged 25 cents for a piece of clothing. And it worked by the way. But it was so interesting that when there was a freebie, it was abused right away.

[19:15] Is this what is at risk here? That God is giving us a free pass and do we not risk abusing it? Even more so, James in chapter 2 of his epistle, he will quote the exact same verse in Genesis 15 that Paul does here in Romans 4.

And he will then argue for something completely different. He will argue that it is not a free gift, but rather that this faith is infused with work.

And that it is faith and work that seems to bring about salvation. So what is it? Do we have this free gift of salvation by God that is credited to us?

Or is it, as James will say in James chapter 2 verses 20 to 24, that it is faith and works that save? It is a controversy.

The plot thickens. First, I think it is important before we just jump into it to say that scripture, we will say this.

[20:28] As people of the English Reformation, we are, I should say, I am held to the 39 articles of faith. If you have a prayer book, rifle all the way to the back, page 700, whatever, you will see these 39 articles of faith.

One of the articles says that you cannot interpret one aspect of scripture to make another part of scripture repugnant. Okay? It is a way, a roundabout way to say that all of scripture coheres, that there is no contradiction.

And therefore the onus is on us to interpret one part of scripture in light of another part of scripture. So, how then do we understand this free gift of grace that seems almost too good to be true, and yet, in some way, James will talk about it in chapter 2 as being faith plus works.

I think, without getting into a long kind of back and forth, and this is worthy of an adult Sunday school or maybe a mini series of sermons, but I would say that it is really summed up with this idea that James is not contradicting what Paul is saying here in chapter 4 of Romans, but he is combating something called cheap grace.

Diedrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian who plotted to assassinate Hitler, wrote about cheap grace in a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*.

[22:00] And he speaks of cheap grace like this, quote, Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate. You see, real justification, the justification that Paul is really honing in on and James is qualifying here, means receiving the gift of God with trust and humility, and then seeking to live a holy and obedient life as a result.

So, to understand that the righteousness of God, it is given graciously by Christ and received by faith, just like Abraham. But it is a faith that bears fruit and is indeed free, but can never be cheap. It is costly. The grace that justifies is also the grace that empowers us to grow in holiness and obedience. Or as the Apostle James will say, faith without works is dead, ineffectual or false, or as Bonhoeffer says, is cheap.

So, what we have between Paul and James is not a difference of substance, but a difference of emphasis. James doesn't seem to be denying that Abraham is justified by faith.

[23 : 38] Interestingly, and we didn't read this section, but James quoting our section in Genesis, Genesis chapter 15, he gives the example of this faith lived out by pointing to Genesis 22, the scene where Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac.

And God stays his hand, and God says, now I know truly that you love me above everything else. It's interesting. He never denies it, but what he is doing is he is focusing on a different kind of emphasis.

This is different from God empowering our souls with grace so that we are able to live virtuously and therefore merit eternal life.

It is a very important thing that we do not allow justification, which is God making us righteous, declaring that we are righteous. This is what Paul is talking about here. It is very important that we don't confuse that with the fruit of justification.

The Bible calls it sanctification, that we are growing in obedience and holiness, growing in virtuous living. These two things, it's vital that they don't bleed into one another.

[24 : 53] They are surely connected, but they are separate. They are lovely and necessary compliments to one another, but they are terrible rivals. In one case, we will have justification, which is a gift from God, and sanctification, which is God empowering us as his children, as his righteous people, to live out godly and obedient lives.

And if we mix those, then all too quickly we will treat our own righteousness, our salvation, as a means of working, of meriting our salvation before God.

It confuses the whole thing. Consider Abraham. This is where it is really helpful to lean into Paul here and consider that Paul is pointing us to scripture. Again, chapter 3, pointing us to scripture. What does the scripture say? So let's consider Abraham. He believes God. Genesis chapter 15. And as a result, it says that righteousness is gifted to him.

But he then, Abraham, lives a very sinful life. If you know the story of Abraham, he's a righteous man, he's a faithful man. He's a terrible sinner.

[26 : 06] I mean, he's not courageous when there is a possibility of him getting killed. And so he pretends as though his wife is his sister.

Puts her in danger. So he can somehow avoid a potential calamity. Abraham is also a terrible father.

He, well, even if you go back a little bit before, he believes God, that God will bring about this promise, but he takes it upon himself to have a child with a mistress.

And then when his wife wants to kick the mistress out, he says, okay, along with a child, sends them out into the desert to certain death. He's a poor father.

His children and his grandchildren, his lineage is truly a mess. Abraham, he is counted as righteous.

[27 : 15] But really quickly, we find that he is a terrible sinner. In fact, we find that Abraham is just like us. A sinner. And nevertheless, because he believed in God and trusted God, that God would do what only God could do, it says that he is counted as righteous.

It's a remarkable thing. This is good news for us. For who can truly live virtuously in a way that merits God's salvation?

How could we hope to obtain divine and eternal righteousness from our mortal souls, even if they are imbued with God's strength to do so?

If salvation relied on our works, we would find that the works we offer are not infused by virtue, but marred by vice. We cannot not sin in this life.

Our works are especially self-justifying and prideful. What's interesting here is that Paul is saying that what is counted to us is a gift.

[28 : 27] But there is a kind of wage that merits something from God that we commit. We'll see this in a few weeks when we're in Romans chapter 6, but it is the wages of sin.

This is the thing that we are excellent at. We are proficient sinners. We are professional at sinning. And Paul will say in Romans chapter 6, in two short chapters, that the wages for our sin is death. But will God pay us our wages, our due wages, even after he gives us his righteousness? Paul then will, and this will be our second and final point, Paul then supplements the example of Israel's greatest patriarch, Abraham, with Israel's greatest king, David, to hammer home the point that God, he gives righteousness, but in doing so, he forgives sin.

So look with me at verses 6 to 8. Actually, we'll back up into verse 5. And to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works. And then here he is quoting Psalm 32 verses 1 and 2. Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered.

[29 : 55] Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. David is an exemplary king. He was a man after God's own heart.

He was a seasoned warrior. He was a man of faith. He united the tribes. He establishes Jerusalem as the kingdom of the unified nation.

He has many things to boast about. Yet like Abraham, he is a proficient, excellent sinner. He is excellent at sinning. We've talked about this a number of times this year about how David in one act of adultery ends up becoming, of course, an adulterer, but a liar, a deceiver, a murderer, a master at sinning.

And it's not just that, but he, like David, sorry, like Abraham, ends up shirking his parental responsibilities. He is constantly at work sinning.

And yet here we find Psalm 32, sin being described as lawless deeds, transgressions that are both crossing known boundaries and a disregard for God and his law.

[31 : 18] And yet, because of God's gift of righteousness, David can enjoy the blessing of forgiveness.

The blessing of knowing that God does not weigh his merits but pardons his offenses. Truly the one whom the Lord does not count his sin against him is blessed, is what David says in Psalm 32.

You see, the wages we should be paid for due to our sin, it really is death. The Apostle Paul is right in Romans chapter 6.

Yet God, he doesn't just pay them, but he refuses to pay them. He does not issue us a termination slip, but instead promotes us.

I'll pause really quickly just to share an anecdote. If you've ever been fired from a job, you guys are all upstanding people.

[32 : 21] Maybe you've never been fired. I've been fired from a job. I was in high school and I was a part of an absolutely boneheaded scheme with some of my friends to steal things from the deli.

It was terrible. But we had a whole system where we would reduce the pay so we'd get hot deli stuff for like a dime, but we'd pay for it. Anyways, we got found out.

And I remember the early afternoon when I probably should have been working, but I was sent home. A FedEx truck arrived and a single packet was given to me.

Simultaneously, it was given to a number of my friends at the same time, all over town. And we opened it and it was our termination paper. And we were rightfully terminated. In fact, we were probably lucky that charges weren't...

We weren't charged for what we did. It was absolutely stupid. What we have here... What we have here...

[33 : 25] Is God refusing to terminate us. Because of the sin we've done, which is far more grievous than stealing chicken fried rice and chicken wings. Okay? It's far greater.

Wedges as well. Like the whole gamut, guys. It's not good, right? It's not good at all. But what he does is he doesn't just terminate us. He promotes us.

Okay? He promotes us. Not because we have been exemplary in our work ethic. Not because we have come early and left late or worked overtime without begrudging our employer.

