

# Faith In The God Who Justifies The Ungodly

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 05 December 2010

Preacher: Rev. Jim Salladin

[ 0 : 00 ] And together, let's pray as we begin. Blessed Lord, you have caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen. Friends, go ahead and sit down, please. And please keep your Bibles open to page 941. Tonight, we are going to pick up exactly where we left off last week. If you were here last week, hopefully you'll remember, that we talked about the fact that Christianity is not primarily a religion. It is that, but that's not primarily what it is. That's not what it is at its essence. Christianity is not primarily a religion. Christianity is not primarily or fundamentally a behavioral management system. Christianity, fundamentally and at its essence, is a relationship built on a gift. And last week, we talked about what that gift is.

[ 1 : 38 ] Let me remind you if you weren't here or if it's a little fuzzy. For the last few months, we've been walking through the book of Romans. And the book of Romans, written by a guy called the Apostle Paul, Paul has been convincing us or driving home to us week after week.

The fact that all of us, it doesn't matter if you're religious or you're not religious, if you're a human being, the book of Romans has had an audacious claim. And the audacious claim is that we are all of us enemies of God by nature.

That fundamentally, we are God rejecters. And the gift that we discussed last week, that gift that establishes our relationship with God, is a gift that we call justification by faith alone.

What does that mean? Very briefly, what we talked about last week, is that even though we are all of us enemies of God, we are God rejecters, God in Jesus Christ, and particularly in the death and resurrection of Jesus, Jesus' death on the cross is resurrection from the grave, particularly in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has opened up a door, or he's offered humanity a gift.

And the gift that he's offered us is total pardon. The gift that he's offered us is that through Jesus Christ, God can look at his enemies and declare us righteous.

[ 3 : 18 ] He can declare us righteous so that instead of being God's enemies, we can be received into God's family. Okay, that's what we talked about last week in real brief form.

That's the gift that we were discussing. Now this week, what we need to talk about is the by faith alone part. Okay? Because if it's true that we're enemies of God, and God has offered us this gift of justification, where we can be pardoned, set right with him, declared righteous, and therefore we are able to be received into his family, if that's the gift that he's offering us, and if it's also true, as Romans is very insistent on, that you can only, the only possible way you can receive that gift is by faith, then it becomes very, very important.

What is faith? What does it mean to receive the gift of justification by faith alone? I mean, you can see that that's a fairly, you know, important question, and it's one that we often just kind of skim over.

So what I want to do tonight is very simply, I want to ask one question, and then draw out some implications from this passage. And the one question I want to ask is this, what is the difference between false faith and true faith?

What's the difference between false faith that will not lead us to receive the gift, and true faith through which we do receive this wonderful gift of righteousness?

[ 4 : 54 ] And here's the bottom line, and I'm going to say this, and it's not going to make any sense, and then I'm going to explain it, okay? So get ready. This is probably not going to make any sense, but I'll try to make it clear. When it comes to the Christian faith, the important thing about faith the thing that makes faith either true or false is the object of faith.

Let me say it in a different way. The important thing about faith is not how much you have or how little you have. It's where your faith is pointed.

The important thing about faith is who do you trust, or what do you trust. Let me try to explain this. I grew up in Southern California, and I went to school in Chicago.

I went to university in Chicago, or just outside Chicago, and as a California kid, I had never experienced winter. I did not know what a snow shovel was.

In fact, when I was first asked to shovel snow, I grabbed a spade and just started digging a hole. I just didn't have a clue. And when American Thanksgiving came around, I was invited by a friend of mine to go hang out at his family's cabin up in northern Minnesota.

[ 6 : 19 ] And so I was very excited about this, and we drove up into the forests of northern Minnesota, which I thought was just as far north as one could possibly go, nearly. And this was before I moved to Canada.

I'm sorry. And we drove into the driveway of his family's cabin, and they were all ready for Thanksgiving and all those sorts of things.

And it was just a winter wonderland. I mean, I was just so excited. I was giddy, because I had never seen snowfall, really. I had never skied. I had never gone on a snowmobile or a ski-doo, depending on who you are, what you call it.

And one of the things about winter that I had never experienced was a frozen lake, which was cool. I looked out, and right behind their cabin, there was this beautiful frozen lake.

And the moon was reflecting off the ice, and I thought to myself, you know, I've heard in Minnesota you can drive a semi across frozen lakes, and they don't break. So I wanted to go out on the frozen lake.

[ 7 : 24 ] So I went, you know, wildly off into the night, and it was great. I mean, my friend and I, we went out on the lake. We didn't have skates or anything like that, so we just kind of walked around and slid and fell down and things like that.

And it was a great time. And then all of a sudden, I looked at my friend, and he was absolutely motionless. And I followed his gaze out a little bit further into the middle of the lake.

And it was night, and the moon was shining, so you couldn't see too far. But what you could see is the light reflecting off the ice and snow made this kind of gray floor to the frozen lake, and then it became absolutely black.

There was just this very clear line, and everything was black beyond it. And I didn't think much of that. I didn't know what it meant. It'd be whatever. But my friend was just, like I said, emotionally, he was petrified.

Because what it was, was the fact that the lake was not frozen very much. And that was just all open water. And we were some distance from the shore, and when we looked down beneath us, the ice that we were standing on was cracked.

[ 8 : 39 ] And that was an awkward moment. In fact, if I remember correctly, my friend told me to get down on my belly and scoot myself slowly to shore, and I got up very cold and wet.

Now, here's the thing. As a silly Californian, I went out on that lake, you know, wanting to walk on water for the first time, very confident in the ice.

I had a high level of faith. My faith in the ice was very, very strong. But it was stupid. It was stupid, and it was false.

And the reason is, the object of my faith, the ice, didn't warrant my trust. Do you see what I mean there? The thing that makes faith either true or false is its object.

It's the thing you're trusting in. Okay, now this is absolutely critical when it comes to the book of Romans because Paul has been trying to convince us for the last several chapters that we are cracked ice.

[ 9 : 51 ] What do I mean by that? Most people, when they think about their relationship with God, intuitively, they assume that if I'm going to have any kind of relationship with God at all, I need to contribute something to this relationship.

I need to bring something. I need to produce something. I need to perform in a particular way. I need to be a certain kind of person that then I can bring before God and on the basis of the thing that I contribute, God will accept me or God will come into a relationship with me or God will bless me or God will, I don't know, make my bank account go up or something like that.

And if that's the way you think, then you've got to understand that according to the book of Romans, your faith is false, you are standing on cracked ice and the water beneath it that you're about ready to fall into is very, very cold.

Dangerously cold. Now, Paul in this passage is talking specifically to the religious community of the day.

He's talking to Jewish people and he's using Old Testament examples. And in particular, he's talking to religious Jews who had, they had the Old Testament law and they had the right of circumcision.

[ 11 : 16 ] And some of them at this time were beginning to think that their performance of the law, their law obedience, their law observance, and the fact that the males and their family were circumcised, they began to think that those two things were the things that they contribute to God and on the basis of those things, God would accept them, God would pardon their sin, God would declare them righteous and grant them entrance into the family of God.

And so in our passage, Paul is looking at them and he's saying, friends, you've absolutely missed it. that is false faith. You are about ready to fall through the ice because you're trusting yourself. You're trusting something that should not be trusted. You're trusting in your performance. You're trusting in this thing called circumcision. And as wonderful as the Old Testament law is, as important as obedience is, as wonderful a gift as the sign of circumcision was, none of those things were ever designed to justify.

None of those things were ever designed to be the basis of our acceptance before God or our pardon before God or being allowed into God's family. And then Paul, in our passage, turns a corner.

And he says, friends, let me show you what real faith looks like. Let me show you what true faith looks like. And here's the thing with true faith.

[ 12 : 51 ] True Christian faith is not focused on me. True faith is not looking at the one who has faith.

True faith is always focused on God. And that's the critical distinction. Think about Abraham in our passage. Paul talks about Abraham and the faith of Abraham.

In the Old Testament, nobody had a higher status than Abraham, right? He was the exemplary, exemplar of faith. He was the father of the nation of Israel.

If you're Muslim or Jewish or Christian, all three of the monotheistic religions all point themselves back to the faith of Abraham. But here's the thing about Abraham, says Paul.

Abraham, the founder of it all, the first one, the original, Abraham was not justified by his own efforts, by anything in him.

[ 13 : 58 ] He was justified by trusting God alone. It wasn't because he kept the law that he was justified. It wasn't because he was circumcised that he was justified.

He was justified by faith exclusively. Look at chapter 4, verse 1. What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather, according to the flesh?

For if Abraham was justified by works, or by performing the law, he has something to boast about, but not before God. What does the scripture say, asks Paul.

And now he quotes Genesis chapter 15. Abraham believed God, or trusted God. Same word in the original. Abraham trusted God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Now, like I said, Paul quotes Genesis chapter 15. And if you go back and you look at Genesis chapter 15 in its context there, God had just promised to Abraham that Abraham would be the father of millions, billions.

[ 15 : 11 ] Right? He says, through you, I'm going to, you will be the father of many nations. You will not be able to count the number of kids you're going to have. But if you know the story, do you remember the problem, the big crazy problem there?

He was really, really old, like a hundred, somewhere around there, and fairly sterile. Okay? He, and the point is, there was nothing that he could trust in himself to make that promise come to be.

He couldn't trust himself, his only option, was to trust the God who could do that kind of thing. The thing that makes faith false is its object.

When you're trusting yourself, that's false faith. The thing that makes faith true is its object. And Abraham, the object of Abraham's trust was God.

And God fulfilled that promise. But before he fulfilled that promise, he looked at Abraham and he saw his faith and he looked at him and he said, righteous before me. This is the mark of my child. [16:20] This is what my people are to be marked by. That kind of faith. That kind of trust. Okay. I want to, I want to point out a few implications from this passage for us.

Implication number one. The key question when it comes to your walk with Jesus is not, do I have faith?

The key question is, who do I trust? Let me explain what I mean by that. Sometimes, I don't know if you've heard people say this, but from time to time I'll hear people say, I wish I had your faith.

Isn't it nice that you have faith? I wish I could have some of that. I wish I could be a Christian if I could only have your faith. And sometimes they're being condescending and they're looking at you and they're thinking, oh, it's so quaint that you have faith.

But sometimes they're being serious, right? And you get people sometimes, and maybe some of you think this way, some of us think of faith as a kind of spiritual aptitude.

[17:36] It's kind of like a religious talent. I have no talent for basketball. None. And when I play, it shows.

I just can't do it. And I've tried. I've tried. But it just doesn't happen. It's just not a characteristic that I have. And some people think of faith that way.

You're either born with it or you're not born with it. And some religious traditions think of faith in that way that it's not the way Christianity thinks of faith. That is not what the Bible means by faith.

Look at chapter 4, verse 5. This is a critical verse. And to the one who does not work, what that means there is to the one who does not trust in his own religious performance.

And to the one who does not work but rather believes or again, we could equally say trusts. And to the one who does not work but rather trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

[18:42] Now I want you to look at that middle phrase in him who justifies the ungodly. That's the critical phrase. That's the thing that needs to ring in your ears.

Christian faith is not some kind of religious talent. It's not a spiritual aptitude or anything like that. Christian faith quite simply is this. It is trusting in the God who justifies the ungodly.

Christian faith is quite simply trusting God to do for you what you could never do for yourself. And Paul is saying that the faith that justifies true faith, the faith that we desire, it's totally relying on God to do the work.

It's completely trusting God to get the whole project done. It's putting our whole weight not on ourselves but on him.

Now think this through then. If you say I can't be a Christian because I just don't have your faith, faith, the problem is not that you do not have faith.

[19:53] You have faith. The issue is where is your faith pointed? The issue is you're placing your faith in the wrong thing. You're still trusting yourself.

You're trusting in your own kind of inborn talent for religious stuff or your inborn aptitude to kind of believe in the unbelievable or something like that. you're focused upon what you have or what you don't have and the apostle Paul in this passage would look at us tonight and say stop thinking about yourself.

Stop worrying about whether or not you have faith or you're the kind of person that is into this kind of thing or anything like that. That's not the point. Stop thinking about yourself and start thinking about the God who justifies the ungodly.

That's where your focus is. Think about the God who loved you precisely when you were his enemy. When you were hating him God was loving you.

And think about the God whose love for his enemies went to such an extent that he entered into human existence. I mean that's in Advent what we're looking forward towards Christmas.

[21:14] God entered into human existence. And as if that was not generous an act enough God in Jesus Christ in the man Jesus Christ gave himself up to death.

Set aside all the prerogatives of deity and was hung upon a cross. Why? So that he could pardon you.

So that he could accept you. So that he could declare you righteous and therefore invite you into his family. Think about a God like that and then ask yourself this question.

Is that the kind of God that I can trust? Could I trust a God that did that kind of thing?

If God did so much for me is it reasonable plausible that I would come before him and say okay okay you've gone that far go the rest of the way take me as I am and I can barely trust you so will you oh God who justifies the ungodly will you come and grant me to trust you?

[ 22 : 32 ] Will you help me trust you? I mean the remarkable thing is that the God who justifies the ungodly has done all the heavy lifting and he will take it all the way and he will give you the faith that you lack he will give you the ability to place your trust in him okay the question is not do I have faith the question is who do I trust?

Second implication you know your faith is false if you either boast about it or despair of it look at chapter 3 verse 27 then what becomes of our boasting?

it is excluded by what kind of law? by a law of works? no but by a law of faith what does that mean? one of the best signs that your faith is false and in the wrong place namely one of the best signs that you're trusting in yourself rather than in God is you will get proud of it I don't think this is terribly surprising religious people like to boast don't we?

I mean I think everybody likes to boast but the thing is I'm a fairly religious person I feel like I can speak from experience I know enough not to boast publicly about my spiritual progress so what I do is I do it privately and what typically I do is I'll look at somebody else and I'll notice I think I'm a little farther along than they are and I experience pleasure I experience pleasure that well after all I'm a little better than average and what happens is typically in comparison with somebody else inside usually it's not that overt but we begin to kind of boast to ourselves but the opposite can happen as well there are some people some people don't end up boasting about their spiritual life or whatever there are some people that absolutely despair

I mean in all probability right here tonight some of you when you look in the mirror you look at yourself in the mirror and you you're convinced that there is something about you there is something that you've done there's something about you that makes you utterly unacceptable before God you look at yourself and spiritually all you see is this ogre looking back at you and you think you could never be a child of God and you despair and maybe you don't tell anybody but you do what I want to point out is that boasting about your spiritual life and despairing of the spiritual life both grow from the same root in both cases your faith is faulty because its object is wrong you're focused upon yourself what you've achieved or what you haven't achieved and therefore you're walking on thin cracking ice and you need to go back to verse 5 go back to verse 5 look at it and to the one who does not trust in his own efforts but rather trusts in him who justifies the ungodly that is the sort of faith that is counted as righteous friends it's all packed in that little verse feed on it okay the one who does not work meaning the one who does not trust in his own spiritual efforts or his law keeping or whatever the point is it excludes boasting because boasting only makes sense if you've achieved something if you've earned something but that little word ungodly cuts out despair because the word ungodly that Paul uses there is a very strong word there's not many stronger words that

[ 26 : 57 ] Paul could have used to say really really really bad person and if it's true that God is the sort of God who loves to justify the worst kind of person imaginable then there is no room for despair but the key to both of them is stop looking at yourself if you boast stop looking at yourself look at the God who justifies the ungodly and you will be humbled and if you despair of yourself stop looking at yourself and look at the God who justifies the ungodly and hope okay last implication you know your faith is true or what one of the indications that your faith is real is when you grow in gratitude and hope for evangelism if it's true think with me with this the moment you begin to see that God really is the God who justifies the ungodly and the minute you see that that Jesus has accomplished everything necessary for you to be pardoned accepted declared righteous received into the family of

God when you see all that you cannot help but be filled with gratitude and you know the Christian life all of the Christian life is receiving a gift and giving thanks for it the gratitude that is the byproduct of true faith is the thing that animates and motivates the Christian life that's what animates and motivates Christian obedience true faith always leads to Christian obedience but the kind of Christian obedience that comes out of true faith is always a thankful obedience it's an obedience that isn't trying to earn something it's an obedience that isn't trying to prove I'm good it's an obedience that displays God is good that's Christian obedience so true faith will always lead to that kind of grateful good works but it will also always increase our hope for mission and evangelism this is the last thing in this passage at the very end there's a funny phrase where the word

circumcision comes up in extremely high amount of times

I don't know if you noticed that and the issue there is that there's a substantial group of the Jewish community that had written off the Gentiles and they were thinking that if you're not circumcised which is a sign of being part of the Jewish community it was a sign of being in the covenant in God's covenant families that are not in which the males are not circumcised that they could never be saved that was some of the thinking that was happening at the time and Paul comes up and he says absolutely not and the reason that cannot be true is because Abraham himself was justified before he was circumcised by something like 14 years now today something similar happens we don't disqualify people because they're not circumcised I hope we don't think that much about it but what we do my guess is that there are a lot of us here who have family and friends who do not know Christ and over time you have pretty much lost hope for them when you think of your family or your friends or the people you work with or whatever you think of a certain group a certain set of people and you think

Jesus could never reach them they're not the kind of people who they're never going to what they think of this whole thing and they're never going to respond and so you stop praying for them you stop witnessing to them and you give up hope and the remarkable thing friends is that if that's you if you have found your passion for evangelism and mission to diminish over time part of the problem is that you are you're not trusting the God who justifies the ungodly see the more you meditate on the God who justifies the ungodly the more you'll see it was a miracle what God has done for me and if God has given such a gift to me when I was ungodly and completely disqualifiable then he can do it for anybody and I want him I desperately desire him to do for others what he did for me and your desire and your hope and your prayer for mission and evangelism will begin to rise the only reason we do evangelism is because

God is a God who justifies the ungodly so I said at the beginning that Christianity is a gift that builds a relationship it's a gift of God and from that gift this wonderful relationship grows up and so I want to just close with two questions the first question is who do you know that needs that gift I mean who is it that you know that needs God's pardon and acceptance his declaration of righteousness so that we can be received into his family it might be friends and family it might be you and the second question is will you trust the God who justifies the ungodly will you stop trusting in yourself will you abandon all trust in yourself put your full weight on him because the same God who kept all his promises to Abraham the same

[ 33 : 20 ] God who became flesh in Jesus Christ and who for our sake was crucified and rose again for our justification that is the God who is deadly serious about being trustworthy you can trust him amen