

Faith In The God Who Justifies The Ungodly

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[0 : 00] Let us pray. Father in heaven, we praise you and we thank you for your word. We praise you because of your great and sure promises for us.

And we pray, Father, that you will give us hearts that are grateful to you for this promise. Help us to grasp the joy of your salvation and to let that joy infect our lives, that we live for you, abounding in hope.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, as we continue looking at God's word in Romans, we're on Romans 3.27.

It's on page 941. And I want to give you a little bit of a recap on the series that we've been going through so far. Just to remind you, we started the series with three sermons on the power of the gospel.

And that was back in September. And then in the second half of chapter 1, all of chapter 2, and part of chapter 3, we have been hearing about human sin and the great problem of God's wrath against sin and the sin of our own sin and the sin of the world.

[1 : 21] Now, if you remember, we preached on that over about six weeks. And I know for some of you, maybe many of you, it seemed like six months. It is somewhat uncomfortable hearing about our desperate spiritual state, that life without Christ is bleak indeed, spiritually.

We did remind you in those sermons of the good news of Jesus, that we were going to be hearing as Romans went along. But still, there is a dark picture of the human condition.

But God's word during that time is immensely important for us because we can't understand the magnitude of the gift of Jesus Christ unless we understand how pervasive the power of sin is over us and over the world.

And so I hope that you were all here last week to hear Jim preach on Romans 3, 21 through 26 because they preached on the gift of Jesus.

And you heard about the magnitude of that gift. If you look back up in verse 23 and following, we heard that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

[2 : 39] That's chapters 1, 2, and 3. And we are justified, all of us, by His grace as a gift through redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood to be received by faith.

So after hearing from Paul, teach us the truth that all are under sin and under God's wrath, what glorious words we heard last week. To hear that God also justifies us by His grace as a gift.

And that word justifies and justified is very, very important for us. Very simply, it means that God's judgment, His verdict on the last day is brought forward, is brought to us right now, and it is very good.

In Jesus, God the judge pardons and forgives our sins. He accepts us as righteous, and He adopts us as His beloved daughters and sons.

And all that is through Jesus' work on the cross. It is the gift, and it is what we rejoice in as Christians. There's two implications for us about the good news.

[3 : 51] There's two very big implications. First of all, that our sin is far worse than we could have believed. And that's what we heard for those six weeks. But secondly, in Jesus, we see that God loves and accepts us far more than we could possibly have hoped for.

We are loved in a way that we cannot possibly grasp. And Paul has a prayer for us that we would, in Ephesians, comprehend the height and depth of that love for us.

It's a wonderful and humbling place to be this morning. It means that what Paul has done is he has prepared us to receive the gift of Jesus. It's a good place to be.

What he has done is he's emptied our hands, in the beginning of Romans, of anything that we would bring to God to accomplish acceptance by Him.

And he does that so that God can fill our hands. And that we can know what we need most. The gift of knowing His love and knowing His acceptance.

[4 : 58] And that very simply is what faith is. It's our empty hands receiving the promise of God. The promise that Jesus has for us.

That He would make us loved and accepted by His grace. By His blood shed on the cross. And this is a very, very Anglican thing to know and believe.

It says, if you were to look at Article 11, if you were bored during sermons, read the articles. It's a good thing to do. It's edifying. And it says this.

It says, We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. By faith and not for our own works or deserving.

That's talking about empty hands. And to make sure that we understand that faith is about coming to Jesus in that way, Paul says, if you look at verse 27, Our boasting is excluded by the law of faith.

[5 : 57] For we hold, as he says in verse 28, That one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. In other words, the works of the law are good, But that is not how a person is justified.

That's not how you come into the place of acceptance and love of God. It is by faith in Jesus Christ. And this is what all of the rest of the chapter 3 and chapter 4 are all about what faith is.

It is the law of faith through which we are justified. And you can almost hear the frustration of Jewish Christians who come with what they believe are very full hands.

Surely our obedience, they would say, to God's law will have an effect on God. It must at least be part of the reason for him accepting us. It must be part of the reason for his love for us, for saying that we are his people.

And this is a very natural drift that you and I as Christians deal with as well. Because our human nature moves us constantly to want to have some kind of measure of control over our salvation, over God's acceptance.

[7 : 12] We want to be able to control him loving us in the same way and make that happen. And the longer we are Christians, the easier it is for us to think about our acceptance being based on what we do and what we have done for God in our lives.

That our status before him has to do with our works. But Paul says, no. From start to finish, God accepts us because of Jesus. And that's why it is such a wonderful thing for us to be able to see in our lives people who come to faith in Jesus Christ for the first time, having come from a place of no faith at all.

Because in them you see this joy of being accepted and loved by God because of Jesus Christ, not because of this background of religious practice or faith.

And Paul says to them in verse 29, look, God is the God of the Gentiles and the God of the Jews, right? And if there's any hesitation, the answer is yes, the God of the Gentiles also.

And then he says to them, because God is one, and this is what you believe, every Jewish person would pray the prayer that starts out by saying, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

[8 : 28] Twice a day you would pray that. So they would say, yes, that's true, God is one. And Paul says, well, since he is one, he justifies everybody in the same way.

The circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. He accepts everyone on the same basis with empty hands.

And this is an extraordinary thing to write because it means that the whole world is opened up to being justified by God. It is the key that opens the door to the world being evangelized.

It means that every person who is sitting in this pew, no matter what your state, no matter what your background, is very close to being justified by God.

It is simply to receive the promise that is offered to you. And that's why Romans is really a missionary book. It says that God is the creator and judge of everyone, and he loves and accepts each person on the basis of what Jesus has done alone.

[9 : 33] That in Jesus, the promise of God throughout history, which said that he would save his people from their sin, that happens in Jesus. And there's no prerequisites to receiving that promise.

There's no cultural conditions. There's no religious observance that must be done before sinners are made right with God. God opens every nation and people group to the gospel.

And you see this being played out in human history, don't you? The gospel of Jesus overflows and transforms people from every culture across the whole human spectrum.

It is not a certain political or cultural phenomenon. It is something that affects each person in the world. And it's because they are justified by faith in Jesus alone.

And verse 31 tells us that far from overthrowing the law, that actually upholds the law because it is the fulfillment. Jesus fulfills the law for us.

[10 : 38] And for us to be able to receive him in righteousness with empty hands is what the law said our great need was. That we would rely on a righteousness that is outside ourselves.

A gift from the God who has created us. But what is faith? What do open hands, what do empty hands look like for us?

Well, we need to look at some real people to see this. So we look at chapter 4. And Paul chooses very brilliantly who he's going to talk about in chapter 4 because Abraham is the father of the people of God.

He is, for the Jewish people, the hero of righteousness. He is the one that everyone would aspire to as being the Jew of Jews, the one who lived righteously.

And he picks him. And in a sense, you can just imagine that the Jewish objectors to Paul's argument are saying, ah, he's played into our hands here. Paul has slipped up.

[11 : 48] He'll have to know from the Bible that God accepted Abraham because of his amazingly good life. But Paul says, no, you've got it all wrong.

Abraham was made right with God by what God has done for him. Look at verse 3. He says, look at Scripture, and he quotes Genesis 15, 6.

And Abraham believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. Now, this is a, the context of that verse, which is very important for Paul in the rest of this chapter, is this.

Abraham's about the age of 80, and he has a vision. And God says to him, I am your shield, and your reward will be great.

But Abraham says, what will you give me? Because I am childless. And then God said, your very own son will be your heir. And then God brings him outside.

[12 : 54] And he says to this childless man, who's around 80, he says, look towards the heavens, look up. And there's no light pollution during that time. He sees the myriad of stars above him.

And he says, look towards heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them. And then he said, so shall your offspring be. And it's at that point of God's promise that Abraham believed the Lord.

He believed the promise. And God counted it to him as righteousness. And you see what Abraham's faith was. It wasn't anything that he did.

It was no righteous act. It was simply with empty hands, believing that God's words were true. It very simply was accepting the promise that was so clearly laid out for him.

And it is against all hope. Abraham receives with empty hands. He is very clear that he is childless. He can never hope to accomplish or even cooperate with God's promise for countless offspring.

[13 : 58] But at the same time, he believes God can and will do what he said he would, what is impossible for Abraham. And what does God do for him? He gives him the status of being right with him as a completely free gift long before acts of great obedience like circumcision that made Abraham such a hero to the Jews.

So do you see what faith is here? It is receiving, believing that promise from God's word. And he acknowledges his own deepness, his deep weakness.

He looks to God for his grace that he has promised, an undeserved gift. Now what we see here, we've got to be very clear that that work is, that faith is not a work that brings favor with God.

It is simply the channel through which God gives him righteousness, a righteousness that does not belong to him. It's not something that he earned. Faith is the channel through which God gives it.

And that's the pattern of faith for all Old Testament believers, of acknowledging our need and our weakness and receiving the free gift from God. If you were to look down at, jump down to verses 9 through 12, we see here that Paul tells us that Abraham's faith was counted as righteous long before he was circumcised and did the righteous requirements of the law.

[15 : 23] And there's a purpose for that. And that's so that Abraham would be the father of every person, whether they are uncircumcised or circumcised, who walk in the footsteps of faith.

That his pattern would be our pattern, would be the pattern of all people who come into the love and acceptance of God. Verse 5 makes that pattern very clear for us.

Let's look at that. It says this. It says, And to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

That verse is a wonderful one because it says none of our works can possibly oblige God to accept us. He says we are ungodly.

It says only by believing, by clinging to Jesus who justifies the ungodly, that we receive righteousness. And so that brings us again to what faith is.

[16 : 23] We take God at his word. And the thing that I was reminded of this as I woke up this morning and was in a hurry to get to church and was going to jump in my car and leave.

I jumped in my car. I couldn't see a thing around me. We don't have a garage, so we had about a half inch of ice on every window in my car. And so I had to get out and scrape the windows.

And of course, when you scrape the windows, you can finally see clearly what is around you. And what God's word does is it's like scraping the windows of our life that we cannot see out of.

And we see very, very clearly who we are and who God is for us. That's what Romans has done for us. And faith is saying yes to that truth that is made clear to us.

That chapter 1, verse 18 and following says, yes, we are unrighteous and godly. And on the basis of that truth, we look to Jesus for our righteousness, which is in chapter 3, verse 21 and following.

[17 : 29] God gives us that gift in his word. He makes it clear to us. And it says that we all come to God first as ungodly. That's our human race. And then God accepts and loves you because of Jesus' sacrifice, his propitiation.

Faith says yes to that truth, to that promise. And it's not a work. It's not about us. It's not about our level of commitment. It is that channel through which a wonderful exchange takes place.

And here's the exchange. Our sin is counted to Jesus on the cross. And God counts his righteousness, the righteousness of Jesus to us.

He takes our sin and gives his righteousness. And you can see the blessing of this. You can see how this changes somebody's life. Look at King David, the other person that Paul mentions, the greatest king of Israel.

In verses 7 and 8 it says, this is from Psalm 32, Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.

[18 : 41] And the incredible thing about this psalm is that David has nothing to offer. David the king, the great leader of the people of God, has nothing to offer.

He only has his lawless deeds and his sin. And he's very conscious. It's very public sin as you know some of it. His hands are empty of anything that could earn favor from God.

And yet by the channel of faith, he knows the deep blessing of the forgiveness of God, of God covering his sin, of God not counting his sin against him.

And so God speaks to you and me in this passage of the pattern of faith that it receives God's grace with empty hands. There was nothing Abraham and David did to earn the gift of righteousness, of being right with God, of knowing his love and mercy.

God gave it to them. He promised it to them in his word and they received it in faith. And that's why Calvin said of faith that faith is like being an empty vessel.

[19 : 50] Faith is the empty vessel and it receives treasure. And it is only because it is empty that it can receive the treasure. There's great humility for us being the empty vessel.

But it is a life changing blessing to receive the treasure of Jesus Christ. The treasure of being loved and accepted in Christ Jesus. It transforms our lives.

It changes the hope and purpose of who we are. I've had some very, very good conversations with Jehovah Witnesses at my door who tend to come, of course, always at the time that is least convenient for me.

and they haven't come in the last few months, sadly, actually. But the conversations that we've had have been around this theme of faith.

And their great objection about God eternally accepting us through faith in Jesus is that you lose your incentive for living the good life.

[20 : 55] If this is true, you know, if the things that you're saying about Jesus, they say to me, is true, then what stops you from taking advantage and doing whatever you want? You know, everything's been given to you already.

And the answer is that when you receive God's acceptance and love in Jesus by faith, God changes your heart even as we continue to struggle with sin.

Martin Luther put it really well. He said, through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily, he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God who has shown him such grace.

This is the change of heart that comes as we receive the treasure, the treasure of righteousness of God. And therefore, what we see and what I explain to the Jehovah Witnesses is that the gospel is a radically different thing from religion.

Religion operates from the principle that I will obey so that I might be accepted by God. But the gospel is completely different. It says that I am accepted through Christ and therefore, I obey.

[22 : 13] This is the life of faith. And God gives his life and his joy as we live for him. In Advent, we know that Jesus is near, that he is close to us, that he is the one who has indeed given us his righteousness and brought us into full acceptance and love by God.

It is the nearness of God to us. And Paul says this will change your life. This will transform you so that you fulfill the law in your life because of God's great acceptance of you.

And you receive that as a gift by faith, that channel that God gives you. And that's why his blessing to the Roman peoples is ours as well.

And I want to read it for us as we close. He says this. He says, May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing in your faith, which is a channel of God's promise for us, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

So may the Holy Spirit strengthen us to abound in hope. In other words, to serve Jesus extravagantly because he has given us the righteousness of God.

[23 : 30] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.