

ROMANS BIBLE STUDY

Romans 4:01-25

Lesson #8

Introduction

When I was first saved and joined a church, I was very surprised to find out that there are so many different theologies and ideological interpretations of the very same Bible. I assumed that all churches believed essentially the same things. I quickly learned that, that wasn't the case at all. My first church made a mission of finding and refuting what they perceived to be the errors of all the other Christian churches. But the truth be known, they had more errors themselves than most of the ones they were trying to expose. Now it's right and proper to point out error and seek to make corrections, but it's essential to know the truth yourself before you set out on that mission. In his epistle, the Lord's brother James said: *1 Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.* (Jas 3:1)

If you've been a Christian for very long you've probably been through more than one church, and sat under more than one teacher of biblical theology. The average Christian gets knocked back and forth like a ping pong ball for many years in their early church life, listening to one teaching after another that seem to contradict each other. Does salvation involve works, or is it by faith alone? Can we be saved by a good life even if we never knew about Jesus? What about all those people who never heard about Jesus, are they really doomed to hell forever? Fully half, or more, of those who consider themselves Christians aren't entirely sure about the answers to these questions. But the answers are there in the scriptures for those who diligently seek them. But the problem is that rather than diligently search the scriptures, it's much easier to just go with what we feel is right. We use our opinions rather than scriptures to fill in the missing blanks, and what we get is what we have in today's Christianity. We have a little scripture blended with contemporary culture, pop psychology, and a little gut feeling, to form a hybrid Christianity that suits our own personal opinions. In some denominations we give this a biblical sounding title like "the priesthood of the believers" by which we actually mean that everyone is free to interpret the scriptures as they personally feel is right.

This idea has some benefits to be sure, like freeing us from forced errors of papacy, and other false religions, but at the same time it opens the door to every opinion of man and gives it equal weight and treatment. One has to ask, does the truth really matter, or is our freedom to decide what the truth is ourselves what we really value the most? The fact is, both of these are important, and as the saying goes "the devil is in the details." How do we allow every believer to individually pursue truth and at the same time decide what actually is truth? Unless you are very fortunate, and sat under a good reliable teacher right from your conversion, you have seen this scenario play itself out in your own Christian life. You have probably held several wrong interpretations in your past, but through good teachers, and diligent study of scriptures, you came to see the errors and made the corrections. Actually the system does work if one is inclined to use it, meaning if one seeks out good teaching, and studies the scriptures diligently, not just haphazardly, a verse or two here and a verse or two there, randomly jumping all over the Bible, but never reading enough at one time to establish a context, or reveal the intended truth. It's amazing how many churches preach like this, and they suffer for it. The price is ignorance.

I'm saying all this because Paul's epistle to the Romans is perhaps the most systematic work he ever produced. One dictionary defines systematic as "done according to a plan" or "methodical." And this definition surely fits this epistle to the Romans. Not that his other epistles weren't systematic, they certainly were, but this one covers the broadest range of any he wrote, and deals with the fundamentals of God's master plan, and how He implements that plan through the use of various means. God's plan is not haphazard, it is methodical and purposeful, and effectual, and extremely complex, and to understand it we must start at the beginning and systematically work our way through, if we're to ever understand what's actually happening. One principle builds upon another, so a right understanding of each is necessary to comprehend the next. This is what Paul has done. He has spent much time and many words explaining that all mankind is under the curse of death for their innate sinful nature, and they cannot save themselves, not even one. There is none righteous, not even one. (3:10,12) A right understanding of this truth, concerning human depravity, is essential to correctly understand what justification by faith alone is designed to accomplish, and why God designed it this way to begin with.

Do we realize that God could have created humanity with a higher capability of righteousness if He wanted to have? He

could have made us so that a few could actually live their entire lives without sin and earn their way to heaven. And then what would He have? He would have a group who were beholding to none but themselves, and very proud of their own accomplishment. This is not what God set out to produce. In fact He gave us an example of what happens under this scenario. We had a heaven with glorious angels, among whom Satan was the most glorious of all. But Satan was not rightly beholding to God, and dared to think of himself as an equal to God. This pride and inflated self-esteem led to the first sin ever committed and the first rebellion ever recorded. (Angelic sin, not human sin) Instead of being grateful to God for his glorious position, he was inflated by pride and self worth, and proved to be worthless to God as a faithful follower and worshiper. But God put him to good use anyway.

Justification is by faith alone so that salvation may be by the grace of God alone, and no one in all eternity may ever think that they have something to be proud of, or boast about in regards to it. God has removed the temptation that destroyed Satan from all His eternal family of worshipers, by creating a situation where they know full well that they are hopelessly lost and totally unequipped to save themselves by their own righteous deeds. There will be no temptation among His eternal family to ever think of ourselves as something, when in fact, we are nothing. Worship must grow out of praise and gratitude to be authentic, and justification by faith alone, through the grace of God alone, is one of the essential elements for the proper preparation of God's eternal family, and a means of control that we shall see very clearly in later chapters.

Paul began this explanation of justification by faith alone, apart from the works of the Law in chapter 3, verse 21, which we examined in our last lesson. But before he began, he spent some 63 or so verses explaining the total depravity of humanity and our inability to save ourselves. He made it clear that both Jews and Gentiles were both totally sinful and deserving of God's wrath and judgement. There are no exceptions, not even one. The Jews believed that they were righteous based on their being of the ancestral lineage of Abraham, and their having received the Laws of God through Moses, but Paul dispelled that notion entirely in his earlier verses. So what then have we learned. What did Abraham learn from his encounter with God, and his being declared righteous because he believed what God had said? What does all this mean? This is what Paul is about to discuss in the next verses. I've titled this lesson:

Faith, God's Only Means of Justification

1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." 4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, 6 just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered.

8 "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

9 Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." 10 How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; 11 and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, 12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

13 For the promise to Abraham, or to his descendants, that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; 15 for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.

16 For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, 17 (as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. 18 In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "So shall your descendants be." 19 Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; 20 yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in

unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. 22 Therefore It was also credited to him as righteousness. 23 Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, 24 but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

Romans 4:1-25 (NASB)

Verse 1-3:

1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

In this verse Paul asks the question straight out - What did Abraham **learn** from this encounter with God? Well, there's no question that he learned more than one thing, but the most significant was that God was willing to credit righteousness to Abraham because Abraham believed that God could and would do something that He said He would do, even when it seemed impossible. This seems to be too simple to be true, and for that reason it's rejected by many. But do you see the irony? They don't *believe* that God will credit righteousness for *believing* what He says? It's as if God declares - believe what I say and I will justify you in My sight, and man responds, nah, that's too simple, we don't believe you.

Paul says: *For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.* Fallen man is prideful, arrogant, and puffed up with self importance. His perception of his existing condition is entirely wrong, and therefore his belief that he can deal with it himself with his own strengths is also entirely wrong. Man wants to think of himself as self-sufficient, and competent, and in control of his own destiny. As long as he thinks this is the case, he is unwilling to accept a hand-out from God, he insists on doing it himself. He might admit that he isn't perfect, but he surely believes that he's good enough, and his own righteousness will suffice to get him into heaven. It is this mindset that keeps the vast majority of humanity from believing and accepting God's declaration that justification is by believing Him, not by our own works.

This is what Abraham learned from his encounter with God, that righteousness is a gift, an unearned credit by an act of God, and is based solely on believing what God says. This runs contrary to our natural feelings and beliefs, but it is undeniably what Abraham learned, and what we are being taught by God in these scriptures. The question is, do we believe it? The redemption of a fallen humanity begins right here. This is where God picks an ordinary, sinful man and demonstrates His loving mercy by establishing the means of mankind's justification. And that means is through man's believing God, and God **crediting** that belief as though it were perfect righteousness in those who believe. There is now, and there has never been, any other attainable means for justification since the fall of Adam and Eve. We must learn, accept, and believe this or we will be lost in self-deception forever. We were born into this world as lost and fallen sinners before we ever did anything, and we are justified and saved by His grace alone, apart from anything we can do. "Unfair" cries the critic, "My sovereign plan" declares the word of God. So, who do we believe? Now, moving on to the next verses;

Verse 4-8:

4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, 6 just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered.

8 "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

Paul makes a very simple analogy, he says that a workman doesn't think of his wages as a gift, but as something that he's fairly earned by his own labors, and is rightly due to him. In contrast, the one who did nothing himself, but simply believes in another who justifies him, to this one his faith is **credited** as though it were perfect righteousness.

At this point someone might argue that the act of faith is our own doing, a choice of the mind, so that's a work in which we may take credit ourselves. This is a popular notion among many, but the scriptures refute this just as clearly as they do our own works. In his epistle to the Ephesians Paul wrote:

7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. Eph 2:7-9 (NASB)

This verse speaks of salvation, and the means that it's implemented by God. I've debated whether the words *it is the gift of God* are referring to salvation or to faith, but the fact is this verse is not trying to make any such distinction. The primary meaning of this verse is that salvation is by grace alone, opposed to works, and that faith is the means of implementation, and is part and parcel with the whole package. The gift is salvation by faith, and both are by the grace of God alone, not by our own works. And of no insignificant importance, there is this very frequent saying "so that no one may boast.. This is why salvation is by grace alone, *so that no one may boast*. No one may boast because no one can boast, because no one had any part in the process of their own doing. It was **credited** to us **for doing nothing**, and the **believing** was as much a part of the gift as the justification.

Likewise, In these verses in Romans, Paul says that Abraham has nothing to boast about if justification is by believing God rather than by his own works. Anyone who is familiar with scriptures knows full well how often they warn us against pride and boasting. God obviously finds this boasting among humans very offensive, and repeatedly warns mankind against it. I said in an earlier lesson that pride has a root in all of us, and it cannot be dug out, so we must keep it pruned very short or it will grow out and ensnare us. The second that we think that we ourselves, by our own works, are sufficient to accomplish, or even aid in our salvation, then we have become hopelessly entangled in our own pride and self-sufficiency. Abraham learned that God would justify him if he believed what God said, not if he could accomplish some feat or live up to some level. In verse 1 Paul asks: *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found (meaning what has he learned)?* And answers that Abraham found (learned) that God has a means of justification that is quite contrary to what we would have thought, and to what seems natural to us. And it is through believing, not by working. And it is this way for a very good and intentional reason that God has specifically chosen from before creation. It eliminates boasting, and pride, and any thoughts of self-sufficiency apart from God. Traits that are absolutely necessary for acceptable worshipers, along with gratitude, and loving affection, and holy reverence. (Just to mention a few) Now, let's move on.

Verses 9-15:

9 Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." 10 How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; 11 and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, 12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

13 For the promise to Abraham, or to his descendants, that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; 15 for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.

The point that Paul is making in these verses is that the promises to Abraham, and his justification was before the act of circumcision. Circumcision was thought of by the Jews as a sign of their justification, because they had the Law of Moses and thought they were keeping it. They had come to perceive that it signified their acceptance by God. And having the Law of Moses, signified by their circumcision, served as proof to them of God's acceptance of them. But Paul reminds them and us that God's justification of Abraham was before he had been circumcised, and was based on his faith, not his act of circumcision. Paul says that it is those who follow the faith of Abraham, not the circumcision, who are the true recipients of the eternal promises. *For the promise to Abraham, or to his descendants, that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.* Even though the Jews knew the story of Abraham, they still put their faith in the Law of Moses to effect their salvation, and Paul is systematically dispelling this error with absolute certainty.

14 For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; Here Paul makes the point that if the promises to Abraham, and his descendants, are based on the Law of Moses, then the unconditional promises that had been made to Abraham because of his faith alone would essentially be nullified, and would now rest on keeping the

Law, and not on the original basis of faith alone. *15 for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.* It's easy to misunderstand this statement. Is Paul saying that the Law is God's wrath? Of course not, he's saying that disobeying the Law is what brings wrath, not keeping it. But since keeping it is impossible, the Law ends up showing God's wrath to a disobedient humanity. But where the promise of justification, and inheriting the world are not based on the Law, but on God's promises, then there is no problem of violations interfering with the outcome. To assure the outcome, God has taken the means out of human control and retained it Himself. This is why God can say with absolute certainty that certain things are going to happen. Not just because He can see the future, but because He controls the future, through the use of various means that were designed and built into the master creation plan from the very beginning. Now, This brings us to the next verses:

Verses 16-17:

16 For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, 17 (as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

Paul again says why justification is by faith rather than works. He says that it's so that justification is forever a matter of God's grace, and not a matter of man's accomplishments. Then he says something that's very interesting, but I've seldom heard much said about it. He says: *so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants.* You see what he's saying? How can God guarantee that the promises will be received by those who believe? Only by doing the necessary part Himself. If receiving the promises we're dependent on our own performance and faithfulness, then how many would be able to keep them to the end? Well, if keeping the gifts meant keeping all of God's Laws to perfection, then none of us would be able to keep them, because there's none righteous, not even one. God guarantees our justification and our receipt of all the promises He's made to us because He himself provides the means, apart from anything from us. This is the only way that it can be guaranteed.

Paul goes on to say *not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, 17 (as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you")* Again, Paul makes it clear that the promise that God made to Abraham was not just for the Jews but for many nations, to all those who share the same faith as Abraham.

Verses 18-25:

18 In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "So shall your descendants be." 19 Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; 20 yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. 22 Therefore It was also credited to him as righteousness. 23 Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, 24 but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

In hope, against all logical appearances of possibility, Abraham believed that he and Sarah would have a baby even when both of them were impossibly beyond the age where that could happen. He believed this because God said so. And he believed that God was able to do whatever He said He would do, regardless of the apparent impossibility. As Paul had just said: *even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.*

22 Therefore It was also credited to him as righteousness. Paul says that Abraham's believing what God said, when it seemed impossible, was also credited to Abraham as righteousness. Note the word credited. Meaning ascribed to him apart from an earning that was due. Abraham hadn't earned righteousness, God simply credited to him as a gift, because he had believed what God said. Then Paul says: *23 Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, 24 but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,* Paul establishes that this credit from God was not just for Abraham alone, but for our own sake as well, who will also receive this same credit of righteousness, all of those who now believe in Him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

It was also written for those who believe that Jesus Christ was delivered up for crucifixion because of our transgressions, and was raised up again to be the ever living source of ongoing imputed righteousness to all those who believe in Him. He both paid the price of death for our sins, and then was raised up again as our only source of perfect righteousness necessary for entry into the eternal kingdom of God. He, Jesus Christ, is the way, the truth, and the life, and absolutely no one can ever come to God the Father except through believing in Him. (Jn 14:6) *"And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven, that has been given among men, by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12) To be justified before God, we, just like Abraham, must believe what God says in His holy scriptures. Now I want to move into my conclusion.

Conclusion:

When I was a young Christian, just figuring out what had happened to me, and where I was supposed to go from here, I would read these scriptures that we've just studied, and I would hear them preached, and I believed what they said. They were very comforting to me and encouraging. I understood that God had saved me through faith and not according to my works, because I knew full well that my works were not meritorious of salvation. And that God had allowed my sin debt to be paid in full by the death of Jesus Christ, and credited to me His perfect righteousness through faith. I felt that I understood this and it comforted me greatly.

But what I wrestled with were the verses like those in Matthew 5:17-20, and chapter 7:21-23 which caused me some confusion. These verses told me that the Laws of God were not abolished, and that only those obeyed them were truly among the saved. The Apostle John said that this is how we know for sure that we really know and love God, if we keep His commandments. (1Jn 2:3-6) At the time, these verses seemed to create a conflict in my understanding. Was justification by faith alone, apart from works of the Law, or was keeping the law also necessary? It seemed like the bible taught both concepts, and in so doing created a conflict. What I was unable to see at that time was the distinction between cause and effect. And not clearly seeing this distinction is what created the perception of conflict. It wasn't the scriptures, it was my misinterpretation of them that was causing the problem. But, by His grace, time and study and maturity have cleared this up.

What the scriptures teach is that faith is the **cause**, and works are the **result** of genuine salvation. When God, by His grace alone, has granted salvation, through His gift of saving faith, then regeneration of the spirit has taken place, and transformation by the renewing of the mind has started to function, and a progressive sanctification of the behaviors has begun, through the work of the Holy Spirit, and the inescapable result is a life that is moving in the direction of obedience to the laws of God, because the heart and mind earnestly desire to do what is pleasing to Him, and abstain from that which brings Him grief.

Good works, and obedience to God's laws, are, according to scriptures, clearly not the means of salvation, but neither are they absent from the lives of those who truly are saved, because these are the fruits of the Spirit, visibly working in the hearts and lives of those who love God. It is these fruits of regeneration that are the light that is set on the lampstand of the believers, to demonstrate the glory of God working in his children. It is these fruits of the Spirit, working in His redeemed, that give flavor to God in His creation of humanity. It is these fruits of regeneration that form the Royal Priesthood that renders service to God, and offers Him acceptable worship. Our works cannot save us, but God has saved us for the purpose of producing godly works within us, and acceptable worship from us. This is not a conflict, it is the proper and intended operation of the plan of God to produce a holy family of worshipers, fashioned through this process into the likeness of Christ, to live with Him in His eternal and perfect kingdom. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

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02/19/12