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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #18

April 18, 2021

Is Acceptance with God by Achieving or by Believing?

Romans 4:1-12

When I was in seminary a group of professors and students went into the streets of downtown Dallas to take a survey. They approached the people on the street with two questions:

“Do you believe that there is a place called heaven where people go when they die?”

“If so, what kind of person goes there?”

They asked these two questions of 75 people. These individuals were from every walk of life and strata of society: businessmen, bankers, housewives, homeless people, sanitation workers, taxicab drivers, and others. The answers given to the two questions may surprise you.

All 75 people who were asked, “Do you believe there is a place called heaven where people go when they die” answered, Yes! But the response to the second question, “What kind of person goes there?” was shocking, to say the least.

Some simply shrugged their shoulders indifferently and walked away. Others indignantly insisted that the interviewer should mind his own business. Many said, “I don’t know.” Of the 75 people who were asked those two questions, only three were either able or willing to give a clear-cut answer to the second question. Whereas all said they believed in heaven, only three indicated what kind of person goes there.

I may be wrong, but my sense is that if you took to the streets of Oklahoma City or Dallas today, the results of the survey would be pretty much the same. The only difference might be the high percentage of people who would argue that everyone goes to heaven, regardless of what they think about or believe concerning Jesus Christ. This is because in today’s world the most popular religious belief is universalism: everyone will be saved!

But one conclusion to be drawn from that survey when I was in seminary is that very few people know anything of the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Sadly, times haven’t changed that much. Few people today, even those who regularly attend church, understand the necessity of faith in Jesus Christ as the sole basis on which God accepts people into his kingdom. That is why I make no apology for sounding so repetitive as we make our way through Romans. Over and over again in this most important

NT book, the Apostle Paul repeats the refrain: *we are justified, declared righteous in God's sight, by grace alone in Christ alone by faith alone.*

So, the best way I know to introduce today's passage is to ask all of you the same questions: "Do you believe there is a place called heaven where people go when they die?" And, "What kind of person goes there?" My hope and prayer is that you would answer by saying: "Yes, and only those go there who have put their complete and unqualified trust in Jesus Christ and what he did for sinners on the cross."

Although Paul writes Romans to both Jews and Gentiles, in this passage he labors to make his point about justification being through faith alone by appealing to two of the most famous of all OT figures: Abraham and David.

The Example of Abraham (vv. 1-5)

When it comes to proving essential truths of Christian doctrine, Paul is not one to take the easy way out. Many times in his letters he launches his attack against the strongest argument his opponents can offer. That is precisely what he does here in Romans 4. As far as the Jewish man or woman was concerned, any discussion of the correct approach to God must consider Abraham, the father of the nation Israel. So the question Paul addresses is whether the life of Abraham validates and upholds the conclusion Paul reached in Romans 3:27-28 that righteousness is by faith and not by works.

Abraham held a special place in the hearts and minds of every sincere Jew. They would likely have sung the song, "If it's good enough for Abraham, it's good enough for me!" It was Abraham whom God chose to be the father of the covenant people. It was Abraham through whom the nations of the world were to be blessed. It was through Abraham that the promised seed would come. Even the Koran, the sacred book of the Islamic world, pays tribute to his greatness, mentioning him in no fewer than 180 verses.

Abraham was portrayed in some Jewish thought and literature as having perfectly obeyed the law, even before it was given. He was the embodiment of all Jewish virtues. According to one Jewish document, "Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life" (Jub. 23.10). In yet another place Abraham is said not to have need of repentance, for he did not sin (Prayer of Manasseh, 8).

In other words, the case of Abraham was paramount in the Jewish mind. If he was not justified by works, then no other person could be. If, on the other hand, he was justified by faith, there can be no other justification for any other individual.

God's call on Abraham's life begins in Genesis 12:1-5a. There we read:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and

make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:1-5a).

This was only the start of a long and incredibly intriguing relationship between Yahweh and the one whose name would be changed to Abraham. The most pressing question of all was how it came about that Abraham was regarded as righteous in God’s sight. How was he justified? On what grounds did Abraham gain acceptance with God?

On the one hand, we could appeal to the basic principles of logic, such as we find in v. 2. A man who is justified by works can boast. But Abraham cannot boast before God. Therefore, Abraham was not justified by works. But logic was not Paul’s final court of appeal. To prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that even Abraham was not justified by works, the apostle quotes Scripture. He does this in v. 3 – “For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’”

The text Paul mentions here is taken from Genesis 15. But there were several important events that took place between the initial call of God on Abraham’s life in Genesis 12 and the events of Genesis 15. A famine broke out in the land, forcing Abraham to travel with Sarah, his wife, to Egypt. While there Abraham was terrified that he would be killed so that Pharaoh might take Sarah for himself. So he told her to lie and say she was his sister. When Pharaoh found out about this, he expelled Abraham and Sarah from Egypt. In Genesis 13 we read how Abraham and Lot separate and divide up the land between them. We read in Genesis 14 of Abraham’s encounter with Melchizedek, who was a type of Jesus the Messiah. It is at this point that we read the important declaration in Genesis 15,

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:1-6).

Abraham’s concern is totally understandable. He is concerned that his servant Eliezer will be his heir rather than a child of his own body. God pushes back: “No, Abraham. Eliezer will not be your heir. Rather, ‘your very own son shall be your heir.’”

How did Abraham gain favor with God? On what basis was he accepted? Was it by achieving or by believing? It wasn’t because of his obedience. After all, he lied to Pharaoh about Sarah. Not even his love for Sarah was the reason why God regarded him as righteous. Nor was it because of his concern for Lot,

his nephew, or because of his great name. Abraham *believed* God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness. What did he believe? [This is the first time the word “believe” occurs in Scripture.]

Genesis 15:6 does not say that Abraham performed acts of love and generosity and on that basis was justified. Paul doesn't appeal to Abraham's transformation in terms of character development and attribute justification to the progress he had made. No. Abraham banked everything on the truth of God's promise. He looked away from his old and impotent body and put his confidence in God. On that basis, or through that means, God declared him righteous.

Paul then turns in vv. 4-5 to illustrate this truth.

Working vs. Believing

I'm fairly confident that all of you who are gainfully employed look forward to payday. You put in the required labor in order that you might receive financial compensation. If it were to happen that for some reason your employer neglected to pay you, you have a legal and moral right to go him/her and demand payment. The employer is legally and morally indebted to you and is obligated to pay you commensurate with your efforts. Your employer is not doing you a favor when he pays you. It is not an act of kindness, even though he/she may like you and greatly appreciate all you've done. Your paycheck is not an expression of kindness, compassion, or grace. It is the payment of a debt.

If a man could work for his salvation, he could justifiably demand of God that he be paid. God would be compelled to bestow salvation, not as a favor, not as an act of grace, not as an expression of mercy or love, but as a matter of legal indebtedness. But God doesn't owe us anything. He doesn't owe us the death of Christ. He doesn't owe us the gift of the Holy Spirit. If you should insist on relating to God as a worker relates to his employer, you will most certainly be paid, but as Paul says later in Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin is death.”

Paul's aim here is to contrast working with believing. Working is the product of one's own efforts and abilities. Believing, on the other hand, looks to another for help. Working involves doing while believing involves receiving.

It is futile to try to work for God to gain his favor. It undermines the very essence of who God is and what salvation means. Paul says it clearly in Romans 11:35 – “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” The reason is because everything we have comes to us as a gift of his grace. As Paul goes on to say in Romans 11:36, “from him and through him and to him are all things.” So again, to use Paul's imagery here in chapter four, trying to work for God to be paid is contrary to the gospel of grace. As it has been said, “The gospel is not a help wanted sign” (Piper). Don't relate to God as an employee. Come to him as a welfare recipient!

So, let's return to the two-question survey that I mentioned at the start. If you believe there is a heaven, what kind of person goes there? Paul says clearly here in Romans 4:5 that *the person who goes there is the one who does not work to merit admittance but who believes God and is received by grace*. Neither

by prayer nor perseverance in doing good deeds nor by church attendance nor by diligence in any particular religious or civic duty is one saved. Nor does it happen by walking an aisle at the end of a service or by raising a hand or by signing a decision card.

So, Paul has made it clear that it is the person who doesn't try to earn or merit acceptance with God who goes to heaven. It isn't by virtue of his work, whatever that work may be, but by believing in the God who justifies the ungodly. It is by means of his faith that God reckons him/her as righteous.

But what is "faith"? What does he mean when he speaks of "believing"? I've said it before but it needs to be said again and again so that there is no confusion. Faith is that act of heart, soul, and mind by which we look away from ourselves and our achievements and trust entirely in Jesus Christ and what he did in his sinless life and substitutionary death. To exercise saving faith is to renounce all attempts or pretense at saving oneself and claiming that Christ alone can save. The beginning of faith is despair! Despair of oneself, despair of ever achieving anything of lasting spiritual value by working for it.

The second thing I want you to see here in v. 5 is Paul's description of the kind of person who goes to heaven. He says two things about this individual, be it a man or a woman. (1) They do not work. He/she makes no bones of the fact that they have achieved nothing that will turn away God's wrath and reconcile them to his favor. His spiritual resume is utterly blank. This is the person who does not come to God with a bill of accounts receivable, saying to God, "O.k., pay up!"

When Paul speaks of a person "who does not work" he isn't talking about unemployment. He isn't saying that once we are saved that we shouldn't concern ourselves with obedience. Remember Ephesians 2:8-10, where Paul says that although we are not saved "by means of" good works we are saved "for" them. He even goes so far as to say that God foreordained in eternity past the very works in which we walk and live. But here in Romans 4 he is talking about "working" with a view to putting God in our debt, working by performing religious deeds and moral acts of compassion hoping that God will be impressed and accept us on the basis of the works we perform. So, working "in order to be accepted by God" and working "because you are accepted by God" are two entirely different things.

But there's a second thing about this person. (2) He/she is "ungodly"! Paul doesn't say this person is white or black or native American Indian or Hispanic. He doesn't say this person is educated or wealthy or pious or socially sophisticated. He says this person is "ungodly," which is to say, profoundly unlike God in every respect, with nothing to commend himself to God. I've got some really good news for you: ***Jesus Christ didn't die for a single godly person! God never justified a single godly person!*** But those whom he does justify by faith become progressively more godly as their lives are transformed by the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit.

But Paul doesn't stop with the example of Abraham. He also appeals to King David.

The Example of David (vv. 6-8)

It's almost impossible to list all the achievements of David. He was a man "after God's own heart." He was a psalmist, writing for us the most beautiful and poetically pleasing songs that man ever put to paper. He was King over Israel, a mighty warrior who put enemy armies to flight. Surely, if ever there were a man who could be justified by his works or his earthly and spiritual achievements, it would be David. Right? Wrong!

Such is what we read in vv. 6-8. David knew firsthand the joy, the delight, the blessing that comes to the person who receives righteousness from God through faith, apart from working for it. The epitome of blessedness, says David, is not some reward for working, but the reception of a righteous standing with God by grace through faith. The blessed man, says David, is not the one who has good works laid to his account but the one whose sins and bad works are *not* laid to his account.

Don't rush past the word "*blessed*", used twice, once in v. 7 and again in v. 8. This is the same Greek word that we find in the Beatitudes which pronounce as "blessed" people who display certain grace-given characteristics. Jesus also declared the person "blessed" who endures unjust persecution (Matt. 5:11-12). So "blessed" doesn't mean you live a pain free life or that you never encounter obstacles or experience frustration. Neither does it mean you are guaranteed wealth or health. But it does mean all is well between you and God. You are the object of his love and favor and nothing you face can nullify or undermine that sort of spiritual intimacy. To be "blessed" in the sense that David had in mind is to rest secure in God's love, inseparable from him, profoundly content in him.

You mean to say that someone like David was able to experience "blessedness"? David, who committed adultery, who probably used his power and authority as king to coerce Bathsheba into a sexual relationship and later conspired to have her husband killed so that he could continue in sin? Yes. How? By faith, by trusting and believing in the God who, when we turn to him in repentance and faith, does not count such sins against us.

This isn't to say there aren't temporal consequences for sin. Although David was forgiven and justified and blessed, he also had to endure the loss of the child that Bathsheba bore to him. He had to suffer discord in his family as his son Absalom plotted to overthrow David's reign and usurp the throne. He had to deal with division and loss in the nation Israel because of his sin. But notwithstanding these temporal consequences of his sin, nothing could ever separate him from the love of God in Christ!

Now, here's the question: *Why* does God *not* count or reckon our sins against us? In other words, on what grounds does he take such magnanimous and marvelous action? Does he simply wave the wand of mercy and dismiss our guilt? Does he merely shrug off our rebellion and unbelief and hostility as if they were nothing and of no consequence? Does he ignore the dictates of his holiness when he forgives us? Does he pretend that justice matters little or that love trumps righteousness?

Clearly the answer is no! The reason why God does not deal with *us* according to our sins is because he has dealt with *Jesus* in accordance with what they require! The reason why God does not repay *us* according to our iniquities is because he has repaid his *Son* in accordance with what holiness demands (in perfect harmony, I might add, with the will and voluntary love of the Son himself)!

David wrote these words of hope and life in Psalm 32 from within the context of the Old Testament sacrificial system. He could confidently speak of such grace and kindness because he personally knew of the Day of Atonement, of the blood sacrifice, of the scapegoat onto whose head his sins were symbolically placed and transferred (see Leviticus 16).

In our case, on this side of the cross that forever and finally fulfills these old covenant types and symbols, we can confidently rest in the freedom of forgiveness because God has “put forward [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood” (Romans 3:25). God did not willy-nilly cast aside our sins as if they were of no consequence. Rather, he “laid on him [the Son, our Savior] the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6b). God did not casually ignore the dictates of his holiness and righteous character. Rather, he “wounded” Jesus “for our transgressions” and “crushed” him “for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5).

This, and this alone, is why we can sing and celebrate that God does not and never will “deal with us according to our sins” or “repay us according to our iniquities”. The measure of God’s “steadfast love” (v. 11) is the depth of the sacrifice he endured in giving up his only Son to suffer in our stead (cf. Rom. 8:32).

Religious Rituals Won't Cut It (vv. 9-12)

Both Abraham and David were circumcised as the mark in the flesh of God’s covenant with the people of Israel. They were Jews. Was it their circumcision that put them in the position of favor with God? Maybe this blessing of justification comes only to those who are the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. Are uncircumcised Gentiles excluded from this experience? No!

Look at how Paul argues in vv. 9-12. He appeals to a well-known fact of chronology. He asks the question in v. 10, “When was Abraham declared righteous before God? Was it only after and because he had been circumcised, or was it before?” The answer is clear: it was “*before* he was circumcised” (v. 10b). Circumcision served to seal the reality of his righteousness that he obtained by faith.

And why did God orchestrate it this way? Why did God make sure that Abraham’s justification and acceptance with God came before he underwent this ritual cutting of the flesh? He did it so that Abraham might be the spiritual father of the Gentiles also, and not just of the Jews. Look at the second half of v. 11,

“The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well” (Romans 4:11b).

Paul’s argument is masterful. His response is irrefutable. He says, “You who are Jews insist that only circumcised people, which is to say, only Jewish people, can be justified and saved. But if that were true, Abraham himself would be lost; he would be unjustified.”

But Paul, comes the response, how can you say that? “I say it,” says Paul, “because when Abraham believed God and was accepted as righteous, he had not yet been circumcised!” According to Genesis 15:6, the text that Paul quotes in Romans 4:3, Abraham was 85 years old when he believed God and was

justified. When was Abraham circumcised? Not until Genesis 17, some 14 years later. Abraham was justified by faith when he was 85 but wasn't circumcised until he was 99!

Simply put, long before Abraham ever submitted to any religious ritual or ordinance or physical act, he was saved and accepted in God's sight!

Neither the ritual of circumcision nor any other ritual of any sort can in any way contribute to our acceptance with God. Whether it be circumcision or water baptism or the Lord's Supper or kneeling or raising of one's hands or giving money to the church or serving in BW Kids Ministry, no ritual, no work, no deed can be the basis for one's acceptance with God.

What, then, was the purpose of circumcision for the Jewish people? And what is the purpose of water baptism for the Christian in the age of the New Covenant? Remember that baptism is the New Covenant counterpart to Old Covenant circumcision.

Paul says it clearly in Romans 4:11. Both circumcision and baptism are signs that serve to "seal" the righteousness that we receive by faith. As a "seal" these ordinances testify to the reality of our standing with God. A "seal" confirms the truth of that to which it points. It authenticates and guarantees the genuineness of that reality. When you are baptized in water you don't gain a righteousness you didn't have. No. You bear witness to the reality of that righteousness that you received by faith. A "seal" of authenticity is placed on your soul as one who is forgiven and as one who now stands righteous before God by faith alone. A "seal" like circumcision or baptism is like the wedding ring when a couple gets married. The ring doesn't cause them to be married but is a visible witness or confirmation that they are now one flesh.

Of course, Paul's main point in demonstrating that Abraham was reckoned as righteous while still uncircumcised is to make it clear that he is the father of both Jew and Gentile. Whether or not you are circumcised has no bearing on your relationship to God. It no longer matters, says Paul, if you have Abraham's blood in your veins. It only matters if you have his faith in your heart. Possessing Abraham's DNA is of secondary importance. Of paramount importance is that you "walk in the footsteps of the faith" that was Abraham's.

Conclusion

What Paul teaches us in this portion of Romans runs contrary to human nature. It is counter-intuitive. It cuts across the grain of what our souls would have us believe. We don't want to think that we are helpless and utterly dependent on another. We've been taught to trust in our own abilities and our skills and talents to gain for us what we want most. We've been told that if we want to succeed in life we have to "pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps!" "God helps those who help themselves!" is the refrain of our world.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ is entirely antithetical to all such notions of self-help and self-reliance and confidence in our native abilities. Don't ever think, says Paul, that by working you can put God in your debt. Don't ever think that your efforts are of such a quality that God is compelled to embrace and accept

you into his kingdom. The only people for whom Jesus died and whom God has declared righteous are ungodly people who have despaired of their own works and turned in faith, and faith alone, to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Have you?