

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Romans 4:4-25

4 Now to him that worketh, the reward is not reckoned as of grace, but as of debt.

5 But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness.

Comments on Romans 4:4-25

Vv. 4-5 – Paul is not discussing the conditions of salvation. He says nothing about the man who “depends” on works and the one who doesn’t. Only perfect works can bring salvation as a debt. “Worketh” is the one who has no guilt. “Worketh not” = no perfect obedience. God counts his faith as his righteousness. “Counted” = not earned.

Notice four things:

1. The “worker” contrasts with the “non-worker.”
2. The “worker” eliminates grace altogether.
3. The “non-worker” is a believer.
4. The “non-worker’s” faith is reckoned for righteousness.

Whatever “he that worketh” means, “he that worketh not” means the opposite. The “worker” is one to whom something is owed. The “non-worker” is one who has not successfully completed the task that is before him – he is owed nothing. All this makes it very clear that obedience and works are not the same thing in Paul’s argument. Though they have much in common, “works,” as Paul is using it here, has nothing to do with righteousness in the experience of justified sinners. Obedience, however, does (6:16). Abraham is a prime example of that. If the “worker” were simply the “obedient” man,

then the “non-worker” would be the disobedient man. But disobedient men are not justified men (Heb. 5:8-9). When obedience is removed from the sacrifice of Christ, it must be flawless and full obedience, based upon which the “worker” is “owed” the wages of salvation. The “non-worker” looks away from his unsuccessful attempt to render full and flawless obedience and makes an appeal to the full, flawless, and finished work of Christ.

Paul and James have no conflict in their discussion of Abraham. Paul establishes that works without faith is of no avail; James establishes that faith without works is of no avail.

Paul’s argument is sometimes used to argue that all conditions for the salvation of the sinner are eliminated. This contradicts both James and Paul. If all works (acts of obedience) are eliminated, faith itself is eliminated, for it is a work. John 6:28-29. Paul tells us emphatically that eternal life is granted to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and incorruption. Rom. 2:6-7. See also Rom. 6:17-18. They obeyed from the heart. Their faith expressed itself in obedience to God. By this obedience they were made free from sin.

Grace provided the plan by which sinners are saved, and grace tells us how to come into possession of that salvation. Titus 2:11-12. If people would quit arraying the commands of God against the grace of God, they would

have a clearer picture of the scheme of redemption.

God's grace is in every command that he gives. The sinner was lost; God prepared a way by which he could get out of that lost state. But that was not enough. Man needed to know how to find that way and how to walk in it. It is as much a matter of grace to tell man how to find that way and how to walk in it, as it is to provide the way. But when God has provided the way and instructed man how to find it, the next move is man's.

This is illustrated on the day of Pentecost. The prepared way had been declared to the people. They asked what they needed to do to enter it. Peter told them how to get in that way. It was all a matter of grace. Then Peter exhorted them to save themselves. Many did what was commanded and were saved. God added them to the church. Their salvation was all a matter of grace – they had believed and been obedient, but they had earned nothing.

Vv 6-8. But Abraham was before the law, and the law that was entrusted to us changed all of that. Paul now addresses that argument. He reminds them that David also pronounced a blessing upon the man to whom he reckoned righteousness apart from works.

We look at three questions in these verses:

1. What is the equivalent, given here,

6 Even as David also pronounceth blessing upon the man, unto whom God reckoneth righteousness apart from works,

7 *saying*, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, And whose sins are covered.

8 Blessed is the man to whom, the Lord will not reckon sin.

to “reckoning righteousness” to a person?

2. To whom does God reckon this righteousness (what is his description)?
3. Is there such a person today?

1. The man that David had in mind was the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works. He defines such a reckoning in vv. 7-8. Reckoning righteousness to a person apart from works means iniquities are forgiven, sins are covered, and sin is not reckoned against him. To do this is to remove the obstacles that stand between a person and his God and the result is a right relationship with God. In short, imputing righteousness is equivalent to not imputing sin, covering sin, and forgiving iniquities.

2. What is the description of the man to whom the Lord reckons righteousness apart from flawless performance? In v. 5 he is called the “ungodly.” Vv. 7-8 describe him as an iniquitous person, a person to whom his sins had been reckoned and whose sins needed to be covered. This is the “non-worker” who is reckoned righteous apart from works.

3. Is there such a person in the world today? Absolutely. Just as surely as there is a person whose faith is put down to his account in order to righteousness, just that surely one’s sins are not put down to his account.

Some say that if people are told that that they will not work for God and will become casual about sin. God forbid. How could one ever respond in that fashion to the God who has saved him?

Before moving on, we need to learn what it means for God to reckon righteousness. Because some have confused obedience and works as used by Paul in his polemical sections, they are fearful of speaking of obedience as reckoned for righteousness. There is the notion that the inner physical surrender of the heart is what is “unto” righteousness and that obedience follows justification. It is thought that deeds cannot be “unto” righteousness unless righteousness results from a combination of both works and grace. This results from a misunderstanding of both grace and obedience.

To begin with, the Bible teaches that acts of obedience may be reckoned unto a man for righteousness. Psalm 106:31; Numbers 25:1-13. Phineas’ act in slaying the rebellious prince and his consort was reckoned to him for righteousness. This is the exact language of Gen. 15:6 and Romans 4:3. In the face of this Biblical language, there’s no denying that acts of obedience can be reckoned unto righteousness.

In Romans 6:16 Paul describes two different people – one serves “sin unto death” and the other serves “obedience unto righteousness.” It makes no sense to divorce the obedience of faith from faith. In fact, the reason that Paul preached the gospel of Christ to those

who had never heard was to produce the “obedience of faith.” Rom. 1:5; 16:26.

Deeds of faith are no more meritorious than faith. It is thought that only “raw” faith can be reckoned unto righteousness, even though that faith will issue in acts of obedience. That not only comes into conflict with Psalm 106:31 and Rom. 6:16, it is wholly unnecessary. The only works that are opposed to justification by faith are wicked works or works of a legalistic nature (works done with the conviction that one is earning salvation). Works that spring out of faith are unto righteousness and don’t at all interfere with the doctrine of salvation by grace.

Another misunderstanding of what it means for God to reckon us righteous is the concept that God imputes Christ’s righteousness to us. The scripture does not teach that God reckons us to be something that we are not. Neither does it teach that God imputes to us that which belongs to another. When by the power of the gospel a man has been made clean and free from sin, God reckons righteousness to him because he is righteous.

God does not pretend that a man is righteous when he is not. Such a doctrine discredits the gospel as God’s saving power, and belittles the efficacy of the blood of Christ. It teaches that corruption remains in the regenerate, but that he is counted righteous because he is clothed with the righteousness of Another.

But the gospel makes men righteous, just as a soiled garment may be made clean, as clean

9 Is this blessing then pronounced upon the circumcision, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say, To Abraham his faith was reckoned for righteousness.

10 How then was it reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision:

11 and he received the sign of circumcision,

as if it had never been soiled, by carrying it through a process of cleansing. So the gospel takes the sin-defiled person through a process of cleansing that makes him as clean as if he had never sinned. The Lord does not play like he is righteous; the Lord makes him righteous by the gospel.

Vv. 9-10 – “This blessing” is the blessing mentioned in vv. 6-8 – the blessing of having the sins forgiven so as to be counted righteous. As Abraham was righteous before he was required to be circumcised, so might the Gentile, of whom circumcision had never been required, be righteous without it.

Both Abraham and David were circumcised men. Thus, the Jews struggle to retain the notion of exclusive blessedness. Their argument would be that since both of these men were examples of circumcised justified men, all justified men must be circumcised. They ignored the facts that they wanted to to make their argument. Paul attacks the argument. Was Abraham reckoned righteous only after he was circumcised? They knew the facts but their sectarian hearts could not grasp their significance. (The same spirit will blind a person to the truth today.) Abraham was justified years before he was circumcised, so circumcision wasn't essential to one's justification.

11-12 – Why then was Abraham circumcised? Circumcision was a sign of the

a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision; that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision, that righteousness might be reckoned unto them;

12 and the father of circumcision to them who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham which he had in uncircumcision.

covenant made with Abraham; it was a sign of the righteousness that he had before he was circumcised; it was to be perpetuated as a sign of membership in that covenant. **THIS WAS TRUE ONLY OF ABRAHAM.** Abraham was righteous by faith before he was circumcised but none of his descendents were. All who followed Abraham and were justified were justified after their circumcision. To him alone it was a seal of his previous righteousness.

The reason that Abraham was justified prior to his circumcision was that he might be the father of all believers. This could not be said of Jacob (Israel). He was not chosen in uncircumcision; he was declared righteous after circumcision.

The Jews who wished to deny blessing to those uncircumcised would by this also exclude their famous father. Circumcision didn't get in the way of his justification; we have seen that he was justified after his circumcision. Still, his justification before and after circumcision was by faith. The fact that circumcision came in after Abraham was justified didn't change the instrumental means of salvation – it was still by faith.

Paul wishes to make himself absolutely clear on this. Circumcision, as such, no more gets in the way of a man's being justified by faith than it did in Abraham's case. Abraham wasn't the father only of the uncircumcised who were justified by faith; he was the father of the circumcised who are justified by faith. Abraham's circumcision wasn't a substitute

for his faith; it was a token of the faith that he already had. (See lesson 6, vv. 25-27, for a discussion of the relationship between baptism and circumcision. Baptism is not to the New Testament what circumcision was to the Old Testament, as some suggest.)

Every Jew knew that Abraham was the father of the circumcised, but not all Jews knew that Abraham was really the father of those circumcised who had faith. Jesus concedes the connection between the Jews and Abraham (John 8:32-40), but he adds that if they were in fact Abraham's children they would do his works.