

Intro:

We are going to continue today our exposition of Romans 4.1-5. Last week I got going on Abraham and had to cut short the material I intended to cover. Our proposition last time was this:

Abraham's testimony proves Paul's proposition: the just shall live by faith alone.

We first considered the **monumental place** of Abraham, which is one of the reasons Paul brings him up. Abraham has a tremendous position Scripturally and in the Jewish mind.

The Jews of the first century were the group most opposed to the gospel. They caused trouble for the gospel almost everywhere the apostles went. The persecution of the church in the apostolic years was predominantly and primarily the work of unbelieving Jews. The first efforts at corrupting the gospel came from Jews who professed to believe in Christ but wanted to add the law to the gospel.

Abraham has a tremendous place in Paul's argument because Abraham is a man clearly justified by God. All agreed on this point. Since all agreed, then Abraham becomes the test case from which to prove the universal doctrine of justification by faith alone.

The second point we considered was the **pivotal testimony** of Abraham. Moses said Abraham was justified in Gen 15.6:

^{KJV} **Gen 15.6** And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.

^{NAU} **Gen 15.6** Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

This testimony of the Scripture shows that the Rabbinical Jewish view of Abraham was quite wrong. They thought he kept the law before there was a law, and thus was justified by his good works. The Scriptures clearly teach that Abraham was justified by faith alone.

As we carry on in the passage today, we are going to look at the **basic significance** of Abraham's justification. His justification sets the clear biblical precedent for all justification.

Paul is going to pick up on one word in the Genesis passage. This word is the pivotal word in the doctrine and is indeed the pivotal word in this chapter. It is used 11 times in the chapter, being introduced here in the quotation of Gen 15.6: the word is 'reckon' or 'counted'.

The word occurs in Rm 4.3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24

When we understand how this word works in relation to justifying sinners, the mystery of justification by faith alone is made clear.

The title of our message is this:

To Him that Worketh Not

Let's read Rm 4.1-5 again, but our text is vv. 4-5.

Proposition: Justification by faith is a 'works-free' zone.

I. Working doesn't work (an illustration) (4)

Note: We are still answering the question of Rm 4.1a – What then shall we say that Abraham has found?

A. A natural concept that illustrates 'working' for justification

1. All are familiar with the concept of 'working'
2. Very few are familiar with the concept of 'working without pay'
 - a. We are not talking about volunteer organizations here – it's one thing if you volunteer to work without pay
 - b. We are talking about working a job and not getting paid

If you are familiar with that, no doubt you were soon looking for a new job. For some reason, when you work, you expect to be paid.

3. No one who works for pay turns around and thanks his boss for his 'grace' in paying him

As the Believer's Bible Commentary puts it: "When a man **works** for a living and gets his paycheck at the end of the week, he is entitled to his **wages**. He has earned them. He does not bow and scrape before his employer, thanking him for such a display of kindness and protesting that he doesn't deserve the money. Not at all! He puts the money in his pocket and goes home with the feeling that he has only been reimbursed for his time and labor."¹

¹ William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments*, electronic ed., Ro 4:4 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995).

4. The word used here: ‘debt’ [KJV], ‘what is due’ [NAU]
 - a. Basic meaning: “debt; obligation”²
 - b. Thayer: “*that which is owed; a. properly, that which is justly or legally due, a debt;*”³
 - c. Used only twice in the NT
 - 1) Once in Mt 6.12 in the Lord’s prayer – forgive us our debts (consistent with later Jewish concept of sin = debt, something you owed God — and could work off)
 - 2) And here, in the main sense of the word, as an obligation someone owes you because of your efforts
 5. Working incurs an indebtedness: the master has an **obligation** to the servant
- B. The futility of making working the basis of justification
1. We are speaking of earthly things by way of illustration
 2. We have seen already that justification is free, by grace from God, it is a gift (3.24)
 3. If someone could work to earn justification, it would no longer be free or a gift

The statement in v. 4 is intended to illustrate the truth of justification by faith and the teaching of v. 5.

Suppose a man could work to gain justification – what would that be like?

A man could pray daily towards Mecca and God would be obliged to save him.

A man could go to confession, say his beads, do his penance, receive the ministrations of the church, and God would be obliged to save him.

A man could spend his free time knocking on doors and distributing the *Watchtower* and God would be obliged to save him.

² *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed., 5:565 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976).

³ Thayer’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*.

A man could be a good man, a notable man in the community, a man full of good works and community mindedness and God would be obliged to save him.

- “To earn salvation by works would be to put God in man’s debt. He would owe it to the successful worker to save him.”⁴
- “God is never obliged by his creatures.”⁵

If *working doesn’t work*, what does it mean not to work?

II. Not working means believing (5a)

- A. The concept of not working is qualified by further explanation
 1. Paul doesn’t mean to say, ‘oh, just give up and live like the devil’
 2. Not working = believing
- B. The contrast, ultimately, is between working and believing (not ‘not working’)
 1. Working [if it were possible] would obligate God
 2. Not working trusts in God
 3. Not working trusts in God’s promised grace
- C. A significant doctrinal key: faith is not a work
 1. There is a controversy in theology that has confused many people over the years concerning salvation
 - a. It is said that man is completely passive in his salvation, he does nothing to earn it (all true believers agree with this)
 - b. But some go a step further: a man cannot even believe
 - c. Even his faith, it is said, is given to him by God
 - d. Thus God did all the work in redemption, and he did all the work in salvation, including the giving of faith so that a man could believe

⁴ H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on Romans*, p. 54.

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 263.

2. Note the clear contrast here however
 - a. A man is not working
 - b. But a man is believing

Therefore: faith is not a work – it can't be if you believe the Bible!

3. Note the statement concerning what is counted for righteousness: 'his faith'
 - a. 'His' = personal pronoun (possessive form)
 - b. Whose faith is it? His own faith
 - c. Is it a work that somehow produces salvation? No! – Faith is no work, our verse says so.
4. A quick look at Eph 2.8-9
 - a. 'Faith' is a feminine word
 - b. 'Grace' is a feminine word
 - c. 'That' [this] is a neuter word

For this word to be describing 'faith' exclusively, the demonstrative pronoun 'this' would have to be feminine: thus, the thing that is a gift is the whole package of salvation, not faith.

D. The principle restated

1. When Abraham was justified, he was not working – God didn't owe him anything)
2. When you are justified, you are not working – God didn't owe you anything

But you believed God's promise that in Jesus Christ your sins are nailed to the cross and you can live forever with the resurrected Christ in the power of his resurrection life ... and you were justified, the moment you made Jesus Christ the object of your faith.

So working doesn't work and not working means believing, and that means...

III. Not working does work (our doctrine) (5b)

A. Notice again our big word for Rm 4: reckon, count, consider

1. Remember that it is an accounting term – it means to credit to your account
2. Notice that Paul introduces it in the quotation of Gen 15.6 (3)
3. He uses it in the illustration of the working man (4 – ‘wages are accounted according to an obligation’)
4. He repeats it in the repetition of our doctrine, the just shall live by faith (5 – ‘faith is accounted for righteousness’)

B. Since Abraham is justified by faith ... and faith is not working ... not working works

1. Did Abraham have works?
 - a. See his altar in Gen 12.6
 - b. See his tithe in Gen 14.20
 - c. See his sacrifices in Gen 15.9-10
 - d. See his circumcision in Gen 17.23

We'll stop there. These are sufficient to show that Abraham had a life full of religious works in response to God's revelation.

Abraham is full of religious works, but these works come in response to justification, not to obtain it.

2. **Proposition:** Justification by faith is a ‘works-free’ zone.

- a. Abraham didn't work, he believed
- b. Paul didn't work, he believed
- c. Your justification comes by your non-work: believing.

Have you believed?

Conclusion:

What has Abraham found? Not working works. Believing works. Faith works. But believing and faith are not works – they just work to the saving of your soul.

William Shakespeare was born April 23, 1564. His 37 plays have impacted world literature. He married Ann Hathaway, had three children, moved to London, and became shareholding director of the Globe Theater, writing such classics as Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, and A Midsummer Night's Dream. Four years before the Pilgrims landed in America at Plymouth Rock, William Shakespeare died on this same day, April 23, in the year 1616. Shakespeare wrote in his Will: "I commend my soul into the hands of God, my Creator, hoping and assuredly believing, through the only merits of Jesus Christ, my Saviour, to be made partaker of life everlasting."⁶

That's it!

I have no idea if William Shakespeare was born again. He could simply have been copying 'boilerplate' into his will. But if he believed the words contained therein, the Bible says his faith is accounted to him for righteousness.

⁶ American Minute with Bill Federer, April 23, 2004, "Crosswalk"
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