

**Intro:**

Our message this week is a bit of a digression from our exposition of Romans. I am taking you through the teaching of the book verse by verse, but sometimes I want to pause and really investigate more fully certain words or phrases. Our passage last Sunday brought us over such a spot.

The phrase is found in Rm 4.5:

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“but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly” KJV

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We didn’t dwell on this phrase in our discussion of faith not being a work last Sunday, but I want to come back to it now.

First, let’s back up and get an overview of where we are going in Romans

1. First, we find that the gospel really can only begin when men are convinced they are sinners who cannot save themselves. (Rm1..18-3.20)
2. Second, we are introduced to a glorious new concept, righteousness without-law by faith in Jesus Christ. [We are really only in the beginning of this point.] (Rm 3.21-5.11)
  - Without-law righteousness manifested in justifying sinners by faith alone and justifying God’s dealing with sinners as a righteous act (3.21-26)
  - Without-law righteousness producing certain advantages over any works based system, especially the works system demanded by the Law (3.27-31)
  - This justification by faith alone proved in the testimony of Abraham (4.1-25)

In this last section, we have been discussing the idea that justification is by faith, not works.

- It is evident in the way Abraham was justified (1-3)
- It is essential as an understanding of the difference between faith and works: works based justification gives credit to the justified, faith based justification gives glory to the justifier (4-5)

This last point is right where we are. We want no credit as the justified, we want to give glory to the justifier.

We especially want to do it as we consider the phrase that is our text this morning, Rm 4.5:

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“but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly” KJV

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Read Rm 4.1-5, emphasize the text again

Our title is:

*Justifying the Ungodly*

**Proposition:** Faith based justification gives glory to the justifier.

**I. Because of who is justified**

A. Remember what justification is: it is a legal verdict of righteousness, a declaration of righteousness

1. The language of the courtroom
2. The prosecuting attorney lays the charges (Rm 1.18-3.20)
3. The attorney for the defense rises
  - a. What can he plead?
  - b. He pleads his own infinite death for the sins of mankind
  - c. He pleads his own infinite life for the life of the believing sinner
4. The verdict is rendered: righteous!
  - a. Righteous without-law
  - b. Righteous by faith
  - c. Righteous without righteousness (that is: he justifies the ungodly)

B. The number of those declared righteous: singular

1. The word ‘ungodly’ here is singular
2. God saves individuals, not groups

“The word is in the singular ... because every man must believe for himself. God does not justify communities.”<sup>1</sup>

Not a huge point, but one that must be made:

- You cannot be justified by your parent’s justification.
- You cannot be justified by the justification of the other saints in your local church.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, *Romans*, p. 110.

- You must come to God yourself, for yourself, and receive his justification by yourself.

C. The nature of those declared righteous: ungodly

1. Ungodly defined<sup>2</sup>:

- a. From a root which has the basic idea of ‘shrinking back from’
  - 1) Someone might ‘shrink back’ from a more powerful enemy soldier
  - 2) This ‘shrinking back’ came to refer to the gods and a ‘shrinking back’ from the gods, *i.e.*, actual worship of the gods
- b. Has an antonym translated ‘holiness’, ‘piety’, ‘godliness’
  - 1) Root meaning ‘good conduct towards the gods’ (in Gk city states an equivalent to good citizenship)
  - 2) Christian piety is a distinct way of life (godliness):
    - a) Not governed by the Law, as were the Jews
    - b) Not consisting in civic acts of religious devotion, as were the Greeks
    - c) Not asceticism (legalistic self-denial)
    - d) But a manner of life, born of faith, in which God is honoured as Creator and Redeemer in everyday life
- c. Ungodliness then
  - 1) Is at root a disregard for the gods, for the ways of the gods, a neglect of godliness (bad citizenship in Gk city states) – evildoers
  - 2) In the New Testament, ungodliness is irreligion and immorality, any kind of conduct that does not evidence a ‘shrinking back’ from God, or a worship of God
    - a) A refusal to give God glory
    - b) A refusal to submit to God’s authority

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<sup>2</sup> Points summarized from Foerster, “σέβομαι, σεβάζομαι, σεβασμα, Σεβαστός, εὐσεβής, εὐσεβεια, εὐσεβέω, ἀσεβής, ἀσεβεια, ἀσεβέω, σεμνός, σεμνότης” *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., 7:168-196 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976).

c) A refusal to follow God's precepts in daily life

So ungodliness is not merely 'being as wicked as one can be' but being unwilling to acknowledge God as God; ungodliness marks a life lived apart from God.

Ungodliness is the characteristic of men without God, they refuse to 'shrink back' before God — they refuse to acknowledge God as God.

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<sup>KJV</sup> **Rm 1.21** Because that, when they knew God, they glorified *him* not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

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2. Ungodliness described

a. We will typically accept Rm 1.18-32 as a classic definition of ungodliness: those who are as vile and wicked as they can be

- 1) Idolaters
- 2) Sexually immoral, especially those of perverted passions
- 3) Greedy, wicked, murderers, brawlers, etc. (see Rm 1.29-31)

It is true that these people are ungodly. Men and women from among them are among those who are justified.

b. But Romans 2 rebukes our pride, pointing to other men who 'aren't as bad as all that' and who are as ungodly as the pagans of Romans 1

- 1) The moral man without God (2.1-16)
- 2) The religious man without God (2.17-3.8)

Ungodliness is the characteristic of men without God, they refuse to 'shrink back' before God — they refuse to acknowledge God as God.

- You can do that by your wicked deeds or by your proud wicked mind. Or both...

D. The miracle of declaring them righteous: unworthy

1. God, in justifying sinners, amazingly is willing to justify people completely *unworthy* of justification

“It is ‘the ungodly one’ who receives this righteousness by faith. He has no merit before God at all; his very existence is revolting to God. Yet God graciously gives the man His favor.”<sup>3</sup>

“How far grace goes beyond justice is seen in a statement that God justifies the wicked (or ungodly). Not only does God justify men apart from works but he does so contrary to what they deserve.”<sup>4</sup>

Moo cites Chrysostom who has this very significant observation: “For a person who had no works, to be justified by faith was nothing unlikely. But for a person richly adorned with good deeds, not to be made just from these, but from faith, this is the thing because wonder, and to set the power of faith in a strong light.”<sup>5</sup>

2. God, in justifying sinners, amazingly is willing to justify you – if you will believe in him

“The paradoxical phrase, Him that justifieth the ungodly, does not suggest that justification is a fiction, whether legal or any other sort, but that it is a miracle.”<sup>6</sup>

Glory to God! He justifies the *ungodly*!

## II. Because of how they are justified

A. Not by works

B. But by faith

“The ἀσέβης is a person who has no *claim* to justification: if he is justified, it must be not on the ground of works, but freely, by God’s grace, on which he relies through faith.”<sup>7</sup>

- The ungodly man cannot stand.

<sup>3</sup> Stewart Custer, *The Righteousness of God*, p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Everett F. Harrison, “Romans” in *Expositor’s*, vol. 10, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 265.

<sup>6</sup> James Denney, “St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., p. 616.

<sup>7</sup> James Denney, “St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., p. 616.

- The ungodly man believes the promise of God to save him from his sins through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- The ungodly man is justified: *declared righteous!*

Glory to God! He justifies the *ungodly!*

### III. Because of Him who justifies

#### A. God is the Creator of the ungodly

1. Adam and Eve were not ungodly when created; they were innocent
2. Adam and Eve became ungodly by their sin, passing the penalty of their sin on all their offspring (death)
3. Every ungodly person from that time on is a corrupted form of that first creation, the first created man, Adam, who became ungodly by his sin.

Ungodliness is the characteristic of men without God, they refuse to ‘shrink back’ before God — they refuse to acknowledge God as God.

God is the creator of the ungodly as the sons of Adam, the first ungodly man.

#### B. God is the Ransom for the ungodly

#### C. God is the Redeemer of the ungodly

Glory to God! He justifies the *ungodly!*

### Conclusion:

William R. Newell is one of my commentators. He was the assistant superintendent at Moody Bible Institute in the early part of the twentieth century. D. L. Moody asked him to devote his time to Bible teaching which he did in weekly classes in Chicago, Detroit, Toronto, and St. Louis. He recounts in his excellent commentary on Romans this story of the Lord’s work of justifying the ungodly:

Newell was holding noon meetings in the Century Theater in St. Louis. He spoke on this text, Rm 4.5. After the meeting, a well-dressed man waited to have a word with him.

“I am Captain So-and-so,” he began (a man very widely known in the city). “You are speaking to the most ungodly man in St. Louis.”

I said, "Thank God!"

"What!" he cried. "Do you mean you are glad I am bad?"

"No, but I am certainly glad to find a sinner that knows he is a sinner."

"Oh, you do not know the half! I have been absolutely ungodly for years and years and years, right here in St. Louis. I own two Mississippi steamers. Everybody knows me. I am just the most ungodly man in town!" Newell tried to quiet him... "Did you hear me preach on 'ungodly people' today?"

"Mr. Newell, I have been coming to these noon meetings for six weeks. I do not think I have missed a meeting. But I cannot tell you a word of what you said today. I did not sleep last night. I have hardly had any sleep for three weeks. I have gone to one man after another to find what to do. And I do what they say. I have read the Bible. I have prayed. I have given money away. But I am the most ungodly wretch in this town. Now what do *you* tell me to do? I waited here to ask you that. I have tried everything; but I am so ungodly!"

"Now," I said, "we will turn to the verse I preached on." I gave the Bible into his hands and asked him to read aloud: "To him that worketh not."

"But," he cried, "how can this be for me? I am the most ungodly man in St. Louis!"

"Wait," I said, "I beg you to go on reading."

So he read, "To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly."

"There!" he fairly shouted, "that's what I am — ungodly."

"Then, this verse is for you."

"But please tell me what to do, Mr. Newell. I know I am ungodly: what shall I do?"

"Read the verse again, please."

He read: "To him that worketh not," — and I stopped him.

"There," I said, "the verse says not to do, and you want me to tell you something to do: I cannot do that."

"But there must be something to do; if not, I shall be lost forever."

"Now listen with all your soul," I said. "There was something to do, but *it has been done!*"

Then I told him that God so loved him, all ungodly as he was, that He sent Christ to die for the ungodly. And that God's judgement had fallen on Christ, who has been forsaken of God for his, Captain So-and-so's, sins there on the cross.

Then I said, “God raised up Christ; and sent us preachers to beseech men, all ungodly as they are, to believe on this God who declares righteous the ungodly, on the ground of Christ’s shed blood.”

He suddenly leaped to his feet and stretched out his hand to me. “Mr. Newell, I will accept that proposition!” and off he went without another word.<sup>8</sup>

Newell concluded the recounting of this story with this: “This beloved man lived many years in St. Louis, an ornament to his confession.”<sup>9</sup>

What about you?

Have you accepted the proposition?

Are you an ornament to your confession?

**Proposition:** Faith based justification gives glory to the justifier.

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<sup>8</sup> Account recorded in William R. Newell, *Romans: verse by verse*, pp. 134-135, footnote.

<sup>9</sup> William R. Newell, *Romans: verse by verse*, p. 135, footnote.