



“Counted Righteous”¹ **Romans 4:1-8**

It’s interesting how your mind remembers some things and forgets other things entirely. Certain conversations stick out. Others fade away. And, for Tracy and me, we remember a specific disagreement we had when we were within our first year (maybe two) of marriage. We were discussing her traveling back to Illinois to celebrate her birthday. Since we lived in South Carolina, it would require her flying back. When Tracy told me the idea that her family had for a special birthday weekend for her, I immediately shut it down. We didn’t have enough money, and she should have known that and not even asked! It might be needless to say that it didn’t end up simply being a discussion. It became an “I’m right and you’re wrong.” But that was coming from me more than Tracy.

Eventually, I said, “Would you mind if I just called my dad to get his wisdom on this?” I didn’t say it to be snarky. Instead, by that point, I thought that I needed some outside thinking. My dad is one of the most godly men I know; so, why not call him, right? Tracy agreed and I called my father. We talked for a little while. I explained to him the circumstance. I expressed to him our financial situation. He asked questions and then he said, “I don’t think it would be inappropriate for her to go.” He might have even said it more positively than that, like, “I think it could be nice for her to go see her family.”

Well, upon hearing my dad say that, I decided to immediately get on my hands and knees. Then I crawled out to the couch upon which Tracy was sitting. I apologized for not listening and not showing care. And, we moved forward with a plane ticket and weekend birthday getaway.

Now, I’m not telling you this story to say that you should always call your parents to solve conflicts in marriage. Or that you shouldn’t care about financial considerations. There is *one* point in me telling you this story: when we’re confronted and confused in what we believe, we need to find greater wisdom or greater authority.

I think we know this innately as human beings. Think about it even with your children. When there’s an argument somewhere, you know what you’re soon bound to hear, right? “Moooooom!” Or, if mom’s not around, they’ll settle for “Daaaaaad!” This doesn’t just happen in the home. This happens in companies. If there are issues, you might go to the Human Resources department. If that doesn’t work, you might try to find a higher authority. This takes place at a national level as well. If a situation is hotly debated, it could eventually go to the Supreme Court. It’s taken to the highest judicial authority in the nation. So, whether it’s at home, work or country, we get that we sometimes need a greater authority to solve our issues.

This is actually what the apostle Paul does in Romans. He’s consistently gone to the higher authority of God’s Word, quoting Old Testament Scriptures. And he’s been doing this in order to prove the point that all humanity is born sinful and therefore all humanity is in need of God to save them. In fact, he’s

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

pressed this point to ensure that people get what he's saying. He's not just saying that we're reconciled with God by grace. But he says that we're forgiven by God by grace alone. Meaning that there's *nothing* you can do to save yourself.

Paul emphasizes this by talking about *faith*. In emphasizing faith, he's not emphasizing faith as much as the object of our faith. It's not faith that saves us. It's Jesus who saves us! So, if someone trusts in Jesus, they don't boast in their trusting! Then they're viewing their faith as a work. Instead, Paul says, we boast in God because (from beginning to ending), everyone (Jew and Gentile alike) are rescued by God apart from works and all of grace!

This is a radical teaching because we're all so prone to want to look to something in us to make us better than others or more appealing to God. But Paul says that we're completely wrong in thinking this way. No one can make themselves good enough! Instead, God's design is that we boast in him – not in ourselves. In boasting in God, we find what we were created for! We were created to glory in God!

This is the freedom Jesus gives. Through Jesus taking the punishment we deserved. Through Jesus satisfying God's Law, those of us who have sinned and also trust Jesus, are not declared righteous in God's sight. This declaration of righteousness is apart from our works. It's all because of Jesus!

Now, when we hear all of these things, our hearts could rejoice. But you can imagine that some people could say, "Well, nice interpretation, Paul; but it's really just your interpretation." Have you ever heard someone say something like that before? They disagree with your view from the Bible and they say, "That's just your interpretation." And then the conversation is shut down. Well, while it's true that what I believe is my interpretation, we should always test our interpretations with the whole of Scripture to see if they align. And so, here with Paul, he's essentially saying, "Ok, so my view disagrees with a prominent 1st century Jewish perspective. Let's go back to the authorities to see what they say!" So here in Romans 4:1-8, Paul goes to Abraham and David and basically asks them what they have to say about being saved by grace alone through faith alone. So, if you haven't turned in your Bibles there already, please go to Romans 4, and after I pray we are going to read verses 1-8 together:

4 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 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 counted to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷ "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." ²

What does Abraham and David have to say about being made right with God? You know, some professing Christians through the ages have even said that they believe people were saved differently in the Old Testament than in the New Testament, but a passage like this argues against that view. In Romans 3, we learned that Jesus took the punishment Old Testament saints deserved. And then here in

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:1–8.

Romans 4, Paul is taking Abraham and David as examples of those who are declared righteous by God through faith. There is (and has always been) only one way to be made right with God: faith in God's saving promises. But it seems as though Jewish people in the ancient world believed differently. In a Jewish writing called *Jubilee*, we read, "**Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life**" (*Jub.* 23:10, as quot. in Moo, p. 256). In another writing, we read that "**no one has been found like him in glory; he kept the law of the Most High and was taken into covenant with him. . .**" (*Sir.* 44:19, as quot. in Schreiner, p. 216).

These Jewish teachings tell us that before the Law was enacted, Abraham supposedly kept it all. And, as a result of his obedience, he was brought into a covenant relationship with God. This comes in stark contrast with Paul's teaching. Paul says we're brought into an eternal relationship with God through faith, apart from works. This is a significant disagreement. So, who's right? In verses 1-8, Paul takes us to clear, obvious statements dealing with Abraham and David. In choosing these two people, he's going to two of the greatest figures in the Old Testament. Without Abraham, there'd be no Judaism. And David was the greatest King in Israel's history. If either or both of these men affirm Paul's interpretation, then the 1st century Jewish people to whom Paul is writing ought to change their position. The higher authority says they're wrong.

So, the two viewpoints are this: **Counted righteous (i.e. – justified) by works v. Counted righteous by faith.** And Paul's main point in these verses is that **a person is counted righteous through faith.** Let's start with being counted righteous by works.

1. Are we justified by works? (vv. 1, 2, 4)

Start by looking at verses 1-2 with me again: **4** What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? **2** For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.³

Paul is talking about Abraham, and he says "our forefather according to the flesh." He's speaking specifically to ethnic Jewish people because he highlights those who are in-the-flesh Jews. So, Abraham is their forefather. Now, the ESV asks "What was gained by Abraham." Other translations will ask, "What did Abraham find?" I prefer the translation of found because the idea behind it seems to be, "What did Abraham discover to be the case?" In other words, let's ask Abraham how he was made right with God.

Before Abraham goes to the Old Testament Scriptures, Paul inserts his interpretation again. In verse 2, he makes clear what he believes. If Abraham was declared righteous by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. What does this mean? It's what we discovered last week. If we base our acceptance and identity and hope and pride in ourselves, our accomplishments, our relationships with people or practices; then we will boast in how good we do with these things. Whether it's our job performance, our self-discipline, our acceptance by others, our accomplishments, our church participation, our parenting – whatever it may be, living a life of boasting in these things reveal we do not boast in God and are therefore still condemned. So, sure, Abraham would have something to boast about if he was declared righteous because of his works. But he wouldn't be able to boast before God.

You know, I've had people tell me before, "The reason why Ventura is growing is because of you. People come here to hear you." I understand that they could be meaning something other than what it sounds

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:1–2.

like. They could be saying, “You have a gift in preaching that people really connect with. Or, God has been working through you to see this growth.” But let’s just take the phrases as-is: I’m the reason for the growth here. Last week, I was talking with another elder and I said something like this to him, “If I’m the one building this church, it’s not going to last!” And listen, if you commit to a church family because of one person, and that one person isn’t Jesus, then you’re going to be severely disappointed. But let’s say I believe the lie that this church is growing all because of me. I start to look at my life and think, “Well, I’m reading my Bible. I’m praying. I’m leading. People are following. The church is growing.” I serve and spend my years sacrificing for people and seeing more numerical growth and expansion. Then, I make it to the judgment seat. God asks me why I should be allowed into Heaven and my response is, “Well, I read my Bible, prayed, led people and the church of Ventura grew.” Sounds a lot like people Jesus talks about in Matthew 7. Didn’t we do many wonderful works in your name? And what does Jesus say he’ll say? Depart from me, you workers of iniquity. So, why would I boast in my work as though I’m the one doing it? No! May I never take pride in myself as though I’m doing something apart from God. May it never be! Instead, may our rejoicing always be in the Lord. He’s our boast! He’s our praise. Let’s boast in him.

And, this is what Paul is getting at with Abraham. If Abraham was declared righteous by God on the basis of his works, then Abraham could boast, but not before God. Who cares if Abraham said, “Well, I am the father of many nations”?! God says he’s the Creator of all nations and all nations have sinned against him. But, you see the Jewish people started to view Abraham through rose-colored stain glass. I mean, when I read what they said about Abraham, I think to myself, “Did they read Genesis?” Immediately being told that through him nations would be blessed, Abraham deceives the ruler Abimelech, leading him to believe Sarah wasn’t his wife. Abimelech takes Sarah to be his wife, and Abimelech is almost cursed. Thankfully God stops Abimelech. What a great testimony of the leader of the Jewish people! But then Abraham takes certain things in his hands and takes in Sarah’s handmaiden to have a child with her. These are just two stories of Abraham’s sins. Was Abraham perfect? No. In fact, we see Abraham leaning on his own understanding and not obeying as he ought to. Sadly, the Jewish people started viewing Abraham has the example. And, when they did that, they ceased to view Abraham in need of a Savior – and they missed the Savior, too. But, no amount of boasting can wipe away the shame of his sin. God cannot declare Abraham righteous on the basis of his works.

This is what we do, too. I remember growing up in Sunday School and so many of the Bible lessons were Gideon followed God. You should follow God, too. Or, Noah trusted God and went into the ark. You should, too. Or, Achan disobeyed and was stoned. You shouldn’t disobey. Clearly, the Bible does teach godly morality. However, when I read my Bible, I simply did not read the sin of these people. It was as if I couldn’t even see it. But then I remember when I began to see it. And I realized, “All these people are a mess! But look at God’s mercy and grace!” This is exactly what God wants us to see in the Scriptures. It’s what Paul said in chapter 3:25, that God in divine forbearance passed over the sins of the Old Testament. He has been patient and planning a way of complete salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. The people Paul is writing to were similar to me growing up. Instead of seeing Abraham as a sinner in need of a Savior. They saw Abraham as a righteous man who obeyed the Most High’s Laws. And, as a result of his obedience, God entered a covenant with him.

Well, if you insist that people are declared righteous on the basis of their works, then look at verse 4:
⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.⁴ Paul then says that if God counts you righteous on the basis of your works, then your relationship with God is simply a

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:4.

business transaction. Listen, you're either saved by grace *alone* or you cannot be saved at all. Some might say, "No, God is still gracious in saving me, but I had to do something." Well, if you had to do something in order for God to accept you or make you more acceptable before God, then God is responding to you on the basis of something in you. And, if that's the case, then God is in debt to you! And God owes you something. But God is never obliged to his creatures! Did you hear that? God is never obligated to do anything for his creation. We do not wield that kind of power. Nor should we dare think we do.

Listen, Ventura, very carefully to this. Whenever you believe God is in your debt – that God owes you something – you have forgotten grace alone. And, you defame God because you have turned him into a client who owes you for your good work. But God did not create us to simply have a business relationship with him. God created us to know and rejoice in and worship him in all we do say and think in his world which he has created. He created us to know him and exult in him! Yet we boast in ourselves. And, every boast we make declares we believe God owes us for something. He owes you *nothing*. And the very suggestion that God could be in debt to us is absurd and sinful. Yet, he has given you everything. And with all he's given, humans have sinned. Even Abraham. And now we only deserve punishment. We can't boast before him. If we depended on our works we would be condemned. Our wages are death – not eternal life.

So, think about it. Do you really want what your works deserve? Oh ponder how this truth changes everything. If we view God has a client who owes us, then we will often place ourselves higher than we ought to. And when things don't go our way, we'll get mad at God. It's like we'll want to fire him. I've seen it in counseling people before. They're angry at God because their version of life didn't come about. Why would God do that when they've been so good and done everything right? I've seen it in my own life with chronic pain. I have had daily pain for almost a year now. It'll be a year at the end of July. I can hear myself talking to my friend saying, "I thought I was good before having this. I don't know why God gave this to me!" There I was treating God like he owed me no pain because I had been good.

But what if God has greater designs? What if God is God and I am not? (Which is the case, by the way.) And what if whatever God does is good and right, and therefore I can rejoice in everything because everything is a gift? Oh, listen to these words. God gives us more than a business transaction. He designs to give us himself. And, in being declared righteous, we are reconciled to him. Don't you want a greater relationship than one of a client? This may sound too good to be true; so, now Paul shows us that this is exactly what God has intended. Let's hear what God said to Abraham, and let's listen to David's words from his own mouth. Let's go to the authorities within Judaism.

2. We are justified by faith (vv. 3, 5-8).

Case Study #1 – Abraham. Look at verse 3: ³ For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."⁵

Paul is quoting from Genesis 15:6. The scenario is where God says to Abraham that he is Abraham's shield and reward. Abraham is concerned about offspring, and then God says that his offspring will be like the stars in the heaven and he would have his very own son. Then verse 6 says that Abraham believed and it was counted to him as righteousness.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:2–3.

This is God's promise to Abraham regarding his offspring – which is not only talking about Israel, but all nations. And not only talking about nations, but talking about *one* offspring to come who would be the Savior of the world. I'm not sure what Abraham understood in this promise. But we do know that Abraham trusted God and his saving promise. And because Abraham trusted God's saving promise, he was counted righteous.

Now, you could say, "Hold on, Genesis doesn't say that Abraham was counted righteous. It says his faith was counted as righteousness." So, God rewarded Abraham's faith because Abraham's faith was so impressive. Hold on. That would go completely against Paul's argument here. If God owes Abraham because of Abraham's faith, God is a debtor to Abraham!

Here's the idea behind counted righteous. I like how Timothy Keller speaks of it. **"To credit something is to confer a status that was not there before"** (Keller, p. 96). Abraham was not righteous. Abraham was a sinner. His faith is not righteous enough. His faith doesn't merit God's approval because even our faith is weak. But God confers a status of righteousness on Abraham through faith? Why? Because faith is the only means through which a person confesses that salvation is outside of them. Their boast is not in themselves. And, even that faith is confessing that we're not worthy. And, more than that, even that faith is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast!

God simply credited righteousness to Abraham. And, Abraham entered this covenant not on the basis of his works – but on the basis of God's grace!

Now, in case someone wants to argue against this, Paul goes on and gives David as the next example. So, let's read verses 5-6 first: ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. ⁶ David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. . . .⁶

Clearly, Paul's emphasis is on God giving people a status of righteousness – not merely God saying that an act is righteous. When Paul says in verse 5 that faith is credited as righteous, he defines by saying David speaks of the blessedness of one to whom God credits righteousness, apart from works. So, faith cannot be made a work. Instead, it's through faith that God credits a *person* righteous. God gives a status of righteousness to those who trust him.

There's a story that I have enjoyed reading to my children at times. It's about a guy who is a priest and he is summoned by the King to preach. But on his way to the castle, he falls into mud and he's too dirty to be presented before the King. He needs clean robes. Unfortunately, he can't clean them. They're stained. He doesn't know what to do. But then the King's son gives the priest his own priestly clothes. And the priest is able to preach before the King. This story is based in an Old Testament story about the High Priest Joshua. He has unclean clothes and then Satan accuses him before the Lord. But then the Lord gives him new, clean robes that are not his own. But it silences Satan's accusations and the priest is clean because he now has the gifted, perfectly clean robes!

This is what Paul is referencing here. Do you notice that Paul says that God declares righteous the ungodly? A statement like this is what brought about the Latin phrase by Martin Luther: *simul justus et peccator*. The phrase means "simultaneously justified and sinful." So, to the one who trusts the Lord, God does not credit them as righteous because they actually are! God does not make us internally

⁶ [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ro 4:5–6.

righteous and then declare us righteous because he makes us righteous either. Remember Romans 3? For all who believe have sinned. All who believe fall short of God's glory. Yet, all who believe are justified by his grace without cause! That means, we still sin. We are still sinners in the sense we still sin. Yet, God has transferred us to a new identity. We are now righteous because we are declared righteous. And, it's not because we are in our heart and in our behavior. It's because of his grace through Jesus Christ. We receive the righteous robes of Christ!

Case Study #2: David. This is how God has always worked. God has always justified the ungodly. Abraham is one example. But look at David as another example. There's blessedness for the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. Blessedness refers to a state of happiness, contentment, eternal favor. Listen carefully. We find eternal happiness, eternal blessedness, eternal acceptance not on the basis of our works or our behaviors or who we are as people or how much faith we have. We experience eternal acceptance by God on the basis of his declaration of righteousness to sinners.

So, Paul quotes from Psalm 32:1-2. Look at verses 7-8: ⁷“Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ⁸Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.” ^{z 7}

Forgiven. Just think of that statement. For those of you who know the weight of your sins, you can appreciate it to hear that you're forgiven. Some of you may be familiar with a certain well-known musical that goes through the life of Alexander Hamilton. I've listened to the whole thing, and towards the end, there's a song that is simply amazed at the fact that Alexander's wife forgives him. Alexander was a workaholic. Alexander betrayed his family by being with another woman for a length of time. Alexander made the relationship public. Alexander also didn't discourage his son when he was challenged to a duel and then his son died. And then, his wife, Eliza, stays with him. The song says, “Forgiveness. Can you imagine?” And the song paints a beautiful picture of his wife staying with him as they work through what the song calls “the unimaginable.” Forgiveness is seemingly unimaginable and yet it's something we find beautiful. But it seems too good to be true.

Think of your own forgiveness. In Romans 2, Paul says that God will judge the secrets of men. Years ago, I read something from a 20th century Christian named Francis Schaeffer who said, “Imagine that you had a recorder around your neck and it was recording everything you said. But imagine it also could record every thought, every desire, every word spoken against someone else. Imagine all you did was recorded.” And then, that recorder was taken off of you at the judgment, and it was played in front of God, the angels and humanity. What would the judgment be against you if you were judged on the basis of that recording?

Now, think of David's words in Psalm 32. Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven! What a state of eternal contentment when you realize your sins are forgiven! Christian, this is what David said in the Old Testament. He didn't know exactly how he could be forgiven because he didn't know Jesus. But David knew the promise of God to bring a Messiah. And God could forgive him. But look at this. God didn't just forgive sins. God also covered the sins. And, in the context of Paul here, Paul is saying that forgiving and covering of sins happens when you're declared righteous! Our sins are covered with the righteousness of Christ! Therefore, David goes on and says, ⁸“Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will

⁷ [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ro 4:7–8.

never count against them.”⁸ Paul is simply using David’s words. David says “count” and Paul says “count.” God chooses to not count sins against certain people. Isn’t that what Paul’s saying here? God counts us righteous. And, in counting certain people righteous, he *never counts* sin against them any longer.

Oh Christian, it’s not only that God forgives you of your sins, but God will never hold your sins up to your face to shame you or to express his annoyance or to demean you. Instead, your sins will never be counted against you. This is freedom, Christian! Your actions cannot change God’s love for you. That sin you sinned yesterday or that sin that you remember from decades ago that comes up every once in a while – that lays no hold on you! And, the reason why is because God is the Savior and he doesn’t save you on the basis of how good you are. So, Christian, boast in God! Rejoice in him.

And, feel free to boast in your weakness, too. God justifies the ungodly. We are ungodly in our flesh. And that changes nothing in my status of righteousness. I can be honest and open and praise the Lord that he loves me always.

I want to draw a quote from Keller again because I love how he specifically worded this. He comments on these verses saying, **“Though you are sinning, it cannot condemn you; it does not affect your status before God. Knowing the blessing of credited righteousness is the only way to be liberated to view yourself truly. Without it, we will either ignore the truth that God is righteous, and that he will only accept a righteous life; or we will be crushed by that truth. We will ignore, excuse or despair at our transgression. But if we have saving faith, we can be real about ourselves, about our flaws and failings. . . because we know the blessing of being sinners whose sins are not counted against us – sinners who are righteous”** (Keller, p. 100).

So, Paul’s gone back to the authorities in Judaism. He’s looked at Abraham and looked at David. Were they declared righteous because they were perfect in their behavior? No. They were declared righteous and then God brought them into an eternal covenant of blessedness. This is how God has always worked – and he can work this way because he had a plan to send his Son, Jesus, to live the perfect life we could never live – and die the death we deserved to die. On the cross, we read in Romans 3, that Jesus became the One who appeased the wrath of God on the cross. Oh, think of this Ventura. God’s wrath is never satisfied in Hell. But on the cross, God’s wrath was satisfied. Jesus actually appeased God’s wrath. And God was actually satisfied with Jesus’ righteousness. And then because of Jesus, all who trust in him receive a new status – righteous. We receive forgiveness of sins – *and we receive a status of righteousness*. It’s only that God views us as never sinning. God views us as having perfect obedience! How can it be? Because of Jesus. Paul will get further into this, but I hope that we can conclude our time together this morning praising God for such a glorious plan. A plan that take away our boasting in ourselves and frees us to boast in the Lord. A plan that causes us to see the immense love of God for us!

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⁸ [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ro 4:7–8.

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