

ROMANS

Part 8: “A New Reckoning”

Romans 3:31–4:12

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Sunday, March 6, 2022 (The First Sunday of Lent)

Scripture Reading

“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. 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, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” (Rom 3:31–4:12).

Prayer

God of glory and wonder, give us ears to hear your voice today. May your Holy Spirit illuminate our hearts with the light of your truth. Help us to know and believe in the righteousness that has been revealed in Christ! So too, we continue to petition you to bring peace to our war-fractured world. Protect and defend the innocent. Frustrate the plans of the wicked that violence may cease. Stir within all human hearts a longing for that perfect peace that will come only when your Son returns to make all things new. Until that day, may your Spirit empower your Church to bear witness to your coming kingdom.

In Christ’s holy name we pray, AMEN.

Introduction

We are continuing our journey through the Apostle Paul's letter to the church of Rome. And as we make the transition from chapter 3 to chapter 4, we will find that we have reached a turning point in this very long and elaborate New Testament letter.

After exposing the universality of our need and the absolute inadequacy of human righteousness, at long last, the clouds have parted and the sun of righteousness has begun to shine. Apart from all human striving, the righteousness of God has been revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

The announcement of this good news—this gospel—is the very power of salvation.

This gospel is not one truth that can be set on a shelf alongside other truths. It is an apocalyptic truth; a truth that transcends all other truth; a truth that puts a question mark against all other truths.¹

Yet, as we will see in today's text, that which has been revealed in Christ is by no means new. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a new idea that the Apostle Paul made up. Rather, the gospel is the unveiling of a mystery that is ancient and true.

Nevertheless, what has been revealed in Christ is new in the sense that it must change the way we look at everything. It changes the way we see the Old Testament. It changes the way we understand human history. It changes the way we understand our lives, our relationships, and our vocations.

As C.S. Lewis once wrote, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else."²

What God has revealed in Christ Jesus invites us to see everything in a new light. The gospel is a truth that demands "*A New Reckoning*" of all that we think we know. And the Apostle Paul will guide us through that new reckoning in our text today.

Exposition

1.) A New Reckoning of Abraham

Much of Romans chapter 4 is answering a question that Paul asks at the very end of chapter 3: "*Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law*" (Rom 3:31).

The question is: if the way we are made righteous is through faith, does that mean faith overthrows the law? In other words, was there even a point to all the commands that

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*. 6th Ed. Translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 35.

² C.S. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?" in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 1949), 140.

God gave to his people in the Old Testament? Or are the Jewish people and their ancient ancestors simply irrelevant now that Christ has come? Has God discarded Israel like temporary scaffolding now that the cathedral of the Church has been built?

Paul's answer to these questions would have shocked the minds of ancient Jewish people. He declares that the righteousness of God that comes through faith in Jesus does not overthrow the law—it establishes and upholds the law!

In other words, the righteousness that comes through faith is not an innovation. Instead, it has been his plan from the beginning. And nowhere is that more clear, Paul says, than in the story of Abraham.

Abraham's story is found in the book of Genesis. In a few weeks, we will take a deeper look at the significance of the covenant God made with Abraham. But for now, what I want you to know is that when the world had unraveled due to sin, God launched his rescue mission for creation through this man named Abraham and the family that would come from him.

From all peoples of the world, God chose Abraham and set him apart for a purpose (Gen 12: 1–3). He said to this man, “Leave your home city. Leave your pagan gods and your idols. Follow me to a new land that I will give you.” And Abraham trusted the Lord and followed him

A little later on, God spoke to Abraham on a clear and dark night (15:5–6) . He told Abraham (who, by the way, was childless and elderly), "I will give you a son, and you will have a family, and the number of your descendants will be so great they will outnumber the stars of the heavens!" And even though he was childless, and even though he was elderly, Abraham believed God with a radical faith.

God also commanded Abraham to observe the ritual of circumcision (17:9–14). Now, don't worry, I'm not going to get into the mechanics of circumcision. But the critical thing to know is that circumcision was an outward sign of the covenant—the binding promise—that the Lord had made with Abraham. And as a result, all of Abraham's male descendants—including that of Jewish people—were to faithfully observe this ritual.

Paul is a Jewish man. He is a former Pharisee who was zealous for the law of God. He knows how important Abraham is to the Jewish mind.

Abraham was the ultimate patriarch of Israel. As a man called out of the nations, he represented the exceptionalism of the Jewish people. Abraham's radical willingness to obey God and observe circumcision shows that he was a remarkable man and a religious hero! Surely, some people thought Abraham is a man who was justified—declared righteous—because of his works.

But, at this moment, Paul does something brilliant. He shows how far from being an example of works-based righteousness, Abraham exemplifies the righteousness that comes through faith alone.

Look back at the beginning of chapter 4: “*What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God*” (Rom 4:1–2).

If Abraham was justified by his works, then he would have something to boast about. He would have something to be proud of. And if Abraham can be justified by works, so could we. We can escape our cosmic need all by ourselves and our own effort—but *not before God*.

The righteousness of man can only be counted for something if the standard of righteousness is other fallen men. To presume that we can work ourselves into perfect righteousness by our own independent strength and effort shows that we haven’t been reading the Old Testament carefully enough. As Paul writes, “*For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’*” (Rom 4:3).

Even the mightiest of all our heroes, even the holiest among all the saints, are nothing without trusting in the righteousness of God. Even Abraham, who is the best of us, needed faith. And if the best of us need faith, then *all* of us need faith.

Abraham did not earn righteousness by his obedience. He believed that what had spoken was true. That act of radical trust—that act of faithful allegiance to the word of God—was credited to him, counted to him, *reckoned* to him as righteousness.

And if Abraham received righteousness through faith, it shows that the righteousness that comes through faith was God’s plan for salvation all along.

2.) A New Reckoning of Righteousness

We are naturally inclined to think of righteousness as something we earn, like a merit badge. That may be how human righteousness works, but it is not how the righteousness of God works. Paul illustrates this difference with a financial illustration: “*Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due*” (Rom 4:4).

There is a crucial difference between a wage that is earned and a gift that is received. When you work a job, a paycheck is not a surprise—it is an expectation. A worker’s wage is payment received for work that has been accomplished. A wage is a reciprocal financial agreement: I do work; you pay me.

But a gift is in a different category. A gift, by definition, is not something that is earned by the recipient. Rather, a gift is motivated by the love, affection, and generosity of the giver.

We want to think of righteousness as a wage we can earn. We wish to delude ourselves into thinking that we can achieve our righteousness through our moral efforts. But the nature of sin has plunged us into a cosmic debt that we cannot escape. We cannot,

through our minimal wage good works, pay the trillion-dollar debt that divine justice demands.

But at the cross, Jesus has paid our debt. The one who lived a perfectly righteous life also took upon himself the penalty of death in our place. And when we cease from trying to earn our own salvation and trust in Jesus instead, we are credited with his righteousness—the very righteousness of God!

As Paul says, *“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness”* (Rom 4:5).

God's grace is radical, incongruous, and superabundant. Not only does the gift of God cancel our debt, but it also floods our account with more abundance than we could ever fathom.

It's like being told, *“Someone has offered to pay off your impossibly huge car loan, home mortgage, and student debt. And also, they would like to make you a billionaire as well. Would you like to receive this gift?”*

No rational person would turn down such a gift, right? But, so often, for the sake of pride, we will say, *“No, I have to earn it myself.”*

So often, we are tempted to slip into the mindset that says, *“I've sinned too much. I need to clean myself up before I can come back to God! I need to punish myself with a self-imposed timeout and then earn my way back into God's grace.”*

Such a mindset is not the way of the gospel. As Dane Ortlund has written in his wonderful book *Gentle and Lowly*, *“It is the most counterintuitive aspect of Christianity, that we are declared right with God not once we begin to get our act together but once we collapse into honest acknowledgment that we never will.”*³

Our nearness to God is found not on the mountain of our religious achievement but in the dark valley where we acknowledge the reality of our desperate need for grace.

The righteousness of God is not a bounty to be earned but a blessing to be received with the empty hands of humble faith. As Paul writes, *“... just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin’”* (Rom 4:6–8).

As God's righteousness is revealed, our sins are covered, concealed, and remembered no more, just like the nighttime stars are outshone by the brilliance of the morning sun.

³ Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 48.

Now, we must reckon righteousness in a whole new way. God's righteousness is not a righteousness that comes from within but a foreign righteousness that comes from without.

In the parable of the "prodigal son," my favorite moment is just after the wayward son comes to his senses. He determines to go home to his father. He has this big speech pre-written and rehearsed. He will tell his dad that he is no longer worthy of being called a son. He simply desires to be a servant of his father's house.

But when the father sees him a long way off, he runs to his son [Show "The Return of the Prodigal" by Rembrandt]. He embraces his son. And before the son can even get out the words of his speech, the father commands that his son be given the best robe, a ring that represents his authority, new sandals, and that a feast be held in his honor.

So too, when we come to an awareness of our need and turn to Christ, we are not cast away or punished. We are given the very robe of his righteousness to cover our nakedness and shame.

3.) A New Reckoning of the People of God

But we might ask, who is this blessing for? Is it just for the Jewish people? As Paul asks in verse 9, *"Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness"* (Rom 4:9).

This question would have been at the front of the minds of the Jewish Christians in Rome. They would have thought, "Well, okay, we are made righteous by faith. Great. Well, that is *our* blessing because we are descendants of Abraham. But what about these *uncircumcised gentiles*?"

Now, it will become much clearer towards the end of this letter, but one of the key reasons that Paul writes this letter is that the Christians of Rome have begun to grow divided. They are dividing not along explicitly theological issues per se. Rather they are dividing along cultural lines.

Christians who are ethnically Jewish are casting judgment on Christians who are ethnically gentile (or non-Jewish) and vice versa.

Thus, one of Paul's aims in this letter is to show that a vision of God that allows for such petty divisions is a vision of God that is too small. Paul wants to show forth a vision of God that is so transcendent and glorious that it shatters any false notion of God that has been propped up to champion any small-minded human agenda.

There has always been a strong tendency and temptation to attempt to make God into a mascot for our people, our culture, our agenda, and our preferences. The Jewish Christians were tempted to do this in ancient Rome. Many American Christians are tempted to do this today. But God is not a mercenary for hire.

There is this moment in the Old Testament when the warrior Joshua is confronted by a figure known only as “the commander of the Lord’s army” (Josh 5:13–15). This commander is fierce, and he holds a drawn sword. Joshua asks him, “Are you for our adversaries or for us?” And I love the response. The commander simply says, “No.”

God will not and cannot be reduced to an instrument wielded within petty human divisions. He will not be recruited to our causes. But he will call us to *his* mission.

So too, Paul will show us that the circumcision of Abraham can no longer be considered a source of division. Why? Paul makes the astute observation that Abraham was counted as righteous before God because of his faith in Genesis chapter 15 well before he received the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17.

Look back at our text: *“How then was it [righteousness] counted to him [Abraham]? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. 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, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised”* (Rom 4:10–12).

Abraham was not circumcised when he was counted as righteous. That means he isn’t just the father of the Jewish people. He is the spiritual father of all gentile people who believe in the promises of God! In fact, the true children of Abraham are not those who are descended from the flesh of Abraham but those who followed the faith of Abraham.

Circumcision was a good thing. But it is not what makes the people of God righteous. Rather, circumcision is a sign and seal that represents the greater reality of the righteousness of God that comes through faith.

What matters to God is not the circumcision of the flesh but what Paul calls elsewhere the “circumcision of the heart” (Rom 2:29). When the word of the gospel goes forth, it cuts us to the heart (cf. Acts 2:37). It exposes our need. But it gives us a new, miraculous life when we trust and believe.

If you have been cut to the heart by the gospel so that you have placed your hope and trust in Christ, you are not alone. You are a part of the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the community of Peter, James, and John; the church of Augustine, Calvin, and Lewis.

This is a new reckoning for what it means to be a part of the people of God. For those who have faith in Jesus—no matter your background, your race, your income, your social significance—you have a place among the people of God. We, the Church, are not a perfect people. We are people who have realized our need for a perfect Savior. And in him, Christ Jesus, we have union with God and fellowship with one another.

Said another way, *“Father Abraham had many sons, many sons have Father Abraham; I am one of them, and so are you.”*

Conclusion

When God made his ancient promise to Abraham about a family that would come by the power of his divine promise, he had you in mind. When Abraham looked to the stars that represented his descendants, he was looking at a star that represented you.

Abraham trusted God with a radical and, at times, terrifying faith—a faith to leave the comfortable; a faith to leave old idols behind; a faith to trust God with an unknown future; a faith to be wounded but given life.

Abraham believed what God had spoken was true and that faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Do you believe that what God has said is true?

God has said, *“For our sake he made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Cor 5:21). God has said that *“[he] shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Rom 5:8). God has said, *“..that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”* (Phil 1:6–7). God has said that he *“...so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16).

As God spoke to Abraham, God has spoken to you through his word. Do you believe?

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we follow in the footsteps of our father Abraham. May we embrace the gift of God's righteousness. May we have faith in the completed work of Christ.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

- 1.) Read Romans 3:31–4:12. How is Romans 4:1–12 attempting to answer the question Paul asks in Romans 3:31?
- 2.) This passage talks a lot about Abraham. Who was Abraham, and why was he so important to the Jewish people?
- 3.) What is the significance of Paul's observation that even Abraham was counted as righteous through his faith?
- 4.) What is the difference between wages and a gift (Rom 4:4), and how should that difference help Christians understand the nature of salvation?
- 5.) Abraham was counted righteous before he was circumcised, showing he is the father of faith for the Jews and gentiles alike. What then does it mean to follow in the footsteps of Abraham?