

THE BLESSING OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Walking in the Footsteps of Faith

Romans Series
PBC 2025

Text: Romans 4:1-12

I want to start this morning by asking you to think about how you would respond to two questions:

1. Do you think of what Paul has been talking about in this section of Romans, “Justification by Faith Alone,” primarily as a doctrine to be believed or as a blessing to be savored and treasured? (Which way would your answer lean if you are honest with yourself?)
2. Do you know someone in your family or circle of friends who has or is considering converting to RCC or Eastern Orthodoxy?

This is an issue facing evangelical believers like us today. A surprising number of evangelicals are converting to Roman Catholicism or Greek Orthodoxy.

I read an article in CT by Andrew Voigt in August of 2024 that had some shocking statistics: 65% of all converts to Eastern Orthodoxy in the US come from Evangelical churches. RCC dioceses are experiencing explosive growth in some cities – between 30% and 50%, with some reaching as high as 70%. And many of these converts are coming from Evangelical churches. (Source: *Some Evangelicals are leaving Protestantism for other Traditions*. Andrew Voigt, CT, August 23, 2024)

Let me put a face to this for us this morning – Sydney Johnston, who converted to Roman Catholicism in December of 2024.



- Her story is told in an article written for The New York Post in March 2025, entitled *"Why young people are converting to Catholicism en masse."*
- Growing up in Orange County, California, Sydney never quite felt satisfied with her Protestant faith.
- *"It felt much more like a cultural experience than something that was really rooted in history with a deep theological foundation,"* she recalled.
- By her early 20s, she had walked away from the church entirely, but when the pandemic hit while Johnston was studying physics and history at Columbia, she suddenly had time to consider what was missing from her life.
- *"Up until that point, I was such a workaholic, but during the pandemic, I started thinking and revisiting my criticisms of Christianity,"* she said. *"I just started reading the Bible, and I found so much wisdom and beauty and meaning."*
- Coming out of lockdown, she set out on a two-year quest across dozens of denominations to find a church that was a fit.
- *"I had this question on my mind, like, do I feel God here? Does this feel like a holy place? And so I really paid attention to the aesthetic and spiritual aspects of the services,"* she recalled. *"And I ultimately just felt myself most drawn to the Catholic Mass."*

- The article goes on to tell the same story for four other young people in their 20s or early 30s who converted to RCC. And thousands more like Sydney are converting every year.

Reason – EOxy and RCC represent the most ancient faith tradition; closest to the Apostolic tradition; reflected for centuries in the earliest creeds; and preserved in the Church. On the other hand, the Protestant Reformation is new, divergent, and reductionistic (faith alone).

People like Sydney argue that the approach to salvation taught by the RCC goes back to the earliest recorded interpretation of the Apostolic teaching, codified by the councils, and validated and protected by the Church (and you got into the church by baptism, and you remained in the church by means of the sacraments).

How did the Reformers answer this – Sola Scriptura! *Which taught that Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in the finished work of Christ alone.*

But this understanding of justification is rejected by many apologists for the RCC and Eastern Orthodoxy as an incomplete, unreliable, and unworthy way to answer the question of how a man is saved. And because justification by faith is often just a theological doctrine in our church's statement of faith and not something we treasure as a source of great joy and rich blessing, many are turning away to embrace another gospel, which, as Paul warned the Galatians, is not a gospel at all (Galatians 1:6-9). ***Who is right? Where do we go for a definitive answer?***

This is not a new problem – Paul faced a similar issue in his day.

The Jews pointed back to a 2,000-year tradition that started with Abraham, was codified by Moses, and was validated and preserved by the Jewish Nation (and one gained entry through circumcision and maintained it by performing the works of the law to earn merit and righteous standing before God).

Put differently, what ancient Judaism, two thousand years before Paul, and Roman Catholicism / Eastern Orthodoxy, two thousand years after Paul, have in common is that they believe and teach the idea that justification is obtained by belonging (baptism), is sustained by behavior (good works, sacraments), and eventually results in believing (creedal belief vs. heart belief).

Salvation becomes a dual effort, where God does His part in graciously washing away your original sin through baptism and placing you into His Church, which is then maintained through the sacraments. You must then work hard to stay in grace and keep your salvation through good works and religious merit earned by you (confession, penance, indulgence, gifts to the church, etc.).

According to RCC, Salvation is a works-based system by which you are initially given saving grace, but you must work hard to keep that saving grace operative and effective.

On the other side of this theological divide, orthodox Evangelicals argue that you believe to belong, and because you belong, you now behave (live) in ways that reflect your new standing in grace.

Salvation is all of God – all you contribute is your sin! God does all the work through Christ on your behalf, and justifies any sinner who is willing to turn away from sin and put their full trust in the finished work of Jesus.

The problem that often arises when this critical difference is put on the table is the question of ***who gets to decide who is right.*** *Who should I believe? Do I trust a relatively new theological development introduced by Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformers 500 years ago, or do I align myself with a religious tradition that goes back 2000 years in time, almost back to the time of the Apostles?*

So, how do we approach this argument? Paul gave us the pattern with the words he put before his Jewish opponent, ***“What do the Scriptures say?”***

And in the first 12 verses of chapter four, Paul uses the inspired word of God from the Old Testament to demonstrate four important reasons why you and I must receive, believe, and treasure the truth revealed in the Gospel that we are justified by grace alone (it is a gift), through faith alone (not by works), in the finished work of Christ alone.

I. Justification is not earned through on Human Merit or Good Behavior (4:1-5)

*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,*

- Justification is the theme of 4:1-12 (repeated 8x in vv. 2,3,5,6,9,11).
- Justification was a legal term before it became a theological term – it meant being declared righteous before a moral or legal authority.
- Paul opens the chapter by asking his Jewish opponent, *“What was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?”* And what Abraham found was justification (righteousness credited in v. 3).
- Put differently, concerning justification – “being made righteous in the sight of God” – how did Abraham obtain this status?

NOTE: Abraham was a pagan idolater like those Paul’s describes in Romans 1:18-32. So, how did someone like Abraham ever obtain justification from God?

Jewish Rabbi’s and Scholars had a ready answer for this question: *“Our greatest teachers and tradition tell us the answer – by his good conduct and meritorious works!”* One Rabbinic tradition taught that Abraham’s obedience was the ground of his justification: *“Abraham did not walk in evil, and he was accounted as a friend of God because he kept the commandments of God and did not choose his own will.”*

Paul goes right past these rabbinic voices and states, “What does the Scripture say?” (And that is where we must go to answer this question in our day!)

And when Paul referred to the Old Testament account of Abraham found in Genesis 11:27 – 25:18; 15:6, we discover ***three important, undeniable, and indisputable facts about Abraham’s justification.***

A. Works and Human Merit lead to sinful Boasting in the eyes of men, not to Justification in the sight of God. (v. 2)

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

- If the Jewish Rabbis and their tradition were correct when they taught that Abraham was “justified” because he earned it through his good works, then Abraham would have something to boast about!
- People would look at Abraham and glorify him for the wonderful work he had done to earn his righteousness and to receive His due reward from God!
- And this does two horrific things: A) it makes Abraham and not God the source of salvation – Abraham, saves himself; and B) it robs God of His glory and gives it instead to Abraham!
- And if you remember, this is exactly the sin that the Gentiles in Romans 1:21 – they refused to honor God and give Him glory!
- And Paul rejects this horrific conclusion by demanding that the Scriptures speak authoritatively to the question of how Abraham was justified before God.

B. Scriptures testify that Only a righteousness that is credited to us from God can justify us before God. (v. 3-4)

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.

- Gen 15:6 clearly states that Abraham was justified not through works but by believing God (faith).

- And Abraham's belief (whole-hearted, fully trusting faith) was the basis on which God "counted" or credited righteousness to Abraham's account. ***So, will you believe Scripture?***
- "Count" – accounting or bookkeeping term that means to credit or to apply to someone's account. (Paul and Onesimus in Phil 1:17-19).
- And we know that earlier in Romans, Paul has already stated that God justifies sinners (like Abraham) by grace as a gift (3:24).
- So, if Abraham (or any sinner) rejects the gift and decides to try to earn his way to heaven, whatever he gets for his efforts will not be a gift or grace but a just recompense for his deeds.
- And since the ***Scripture clearly states that Abraham was credited with righteousness because of his faith (Gen 15:6)***, his justification (and anyone else's) was never based on works!
- NOTE: Abraham is not the first righteous person to live. However, he is the first individual explicitly mentioned as having righteousness credited to him because he believed God (Gen 15:6). Since this is the first formal statement of this truth, it sets the pattern for how God accounts righteousness for all sinners.

C. Whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith is the only means to obtain the kind of righteousness that justifies us. (v. 5)

And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

- Repetition is intentional in Paul because this truth is so important and because it will be consistently attacked.
- Righteousness from God will never be credited to the account of the one who works. His account will only contain his own righteousness which, according to Isaiah, is as filthy rags in the sight of God (Is. 64:6)
- BUT clearly, there are people to who God does credit His own righteousness (Abraham and David are two examples) – and so on what basis does God do this for sinful people?
- He does it on the basis of belief in him who justifies the ungodly!

- The object of belief that saves is God! The content of that belief is whatever God demands. And the nature of that kind of belief is faith – whole-hearted, fully-trusting, faith in God that cause a man like Abraham to turn away from the idols he had served for 75 years to follow a God he could not see to a land he did not know in search of a city that had not yet been built!

II. Justification is not granted because of Religious Association or Belonging (4:9-11a)

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

First question (back in 4:3): How did Abraham obtain the righteousness that justified him in God's sight?

Second question (here in 4:9): Is this blessing limited to Abraham's physical descendants—the Jews (circumcised)? Or is it also available to Gentiles (uncircumcised)?

Paul's response challenged another deeply held Jewish belief – that circumcision was necessary for salvation. It was considered the first good deed a Jew did (or had done for him) and symbolized his inclusion in God's chosen people. Additionally, it committed him to a lifetime of performing works of the Law in an effort to earn righteousness that would make him acceptable to God. But most importantly, it became the ethnic boundary for salvation – Salvation was from the Lord, but it was primarily for Jews!

And Paul demolished this deeply held belief by asking when Abraham was physically circumcised (4:10). Was it before or after God considered him righteous because of his belief (Gen 15:6)?

The answer is that he believed in Gen 15 but wasn't circumcised for 12 to 15 more years until the events in Gen 17. So, if circumcision was not

the basis for obtaining justification, what did it do? Paul said it was a sign that functioned as a seal of the righteousness Abraham obtained by faith. NOTE: Seal – validates the authenticity or the completeness of something. Often used to show the genuineness of a product or to show authority and finality on a document.

Circumcision served as a validation that God accepted Abraham's faith as genuine, and based on that faith, credited Abraham's account with His own righteousness. ***This sign was given 12-15 years after Abraham's belief was credited to him as righteousness*** before God.

And because the righteousness Abraham received was based on His faith and not circumcision, it is available to everyone regardless of their ethnic background!

III. Justification is based on Credited Righteousness obtained through genuine personal Belief in Christ (4:11b-12)

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, ¹² 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.

Paul emphasizes to his Jewish opponent that God based justification on faith rather than circumcision, making Abraham the father of all who believe and walk in the same faith Abraham had before he was circumcised—both Gentiles (without being circumcised) and Jews (those who are circumcised).

A. How would a pagan Gentile idolater follow the footsteps of Abraham's faith?

- He would do what Abraham did when God revealed the truth about Himself to Abraham! He turned from the idols of Ur that had been his gods for 75 years. He worshipped and served the true and living God of Heaven. And he waited patiently for God to send the son He promised.

- And this is what another group of gentile idolaters in Thessalonica did when Paul preached the gospel to them (1 Thess 1:9-10).

B. How would a self-righteous, circumcised Jew follow the footsteps of Abraham's faith?

- He would do what Paul did on the road to Damascus – he would count (reckon) everything (whatever he had gained by his law-keeping) as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord . . . that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law, but that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith! (Phil 3:7-9).
- In other words, he would turn from following Moses to serve and worship Jesus of Nazareth as God's Messiah and embrace Jesus as his own Savior and Lord.
- This was unthinkable for most Jews like Paul—unless God quickened their dead heart and opened their blind eyes!
- And this is as unthinkable to some in our day as it was in Paul's.

This brings us to the final point in this text – Justification by faith is not just a doctrinal belief; it is a rich blessing to experience/savor and an eternal treasure to cherish.

And when we don't value or appreciate this incredible truth, either we will turn away from this doctrine and accept a false way of justification that will condemn our souls, OR we will fail to treasure and savor this doctrine, impoverishing our souls.

IV. Justification obtained is a Rich Blessing to be enjoyed and an Eternal Treasure to be prized above all earthly pleasure (4:6-8)

*. . . 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."*

- Three times in these verses, David talks about the immense blessing (the good fortune and extreme happiness) of the one who gets righteousness credited to him apart from works. (Psalm 32:1-3)
- And David knew just how incredible that blessing was when he was credited with righteousness despite coveting his neighbor's wife, committing adultery, and murdering her husband!

A. Full and complete righteousness credited to me apart from works

- None of our good deeds contributes to the righteousness fully credited to our account
- None of our bad deeds subtracts from the righteousness fully credited to our account.
- We get all of God's righteousness there is to get – it will never be depleted or revoked by any sin we commit. It will never be increased by any good work we attempt to do.

B. Forgiveness granted to me – my lawless deeds forgiven!

C. Freedom from the weight of guilt and the shame of sin is applied to me – my sins are covered!

D. Relationship with God is established and restored to me – blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute sin!

Psalm 1:1-3 describes a “blessed man” who is approved by God because he meditates on the Law of the Lord day and night; he follows this law in his daily life – he does not listen to the counsel of the ungodly, he does not walk in the way of sinners, and he does not sit in the seat of scorners! And this man is blessed!

But what happens to a man who has all these blessings and sins like David did? What happens to someone who listens to the counsel of the ungodly, walks in the ways of sinners, and mocks God? What hope does such a man have of ever being justified again?

David stands before us and says, "I am that man! And I can tell you how God restored to me the joy of my salvation. My justification was never at risk because it was never based on my works. But I destroyed the joy of my salvation through my high-handed sin. Yet, God forgave me! He restored me! And He gave me joy once again."

Conclusion: How should this doctrine affect us? How should it show up in our daily lives as we walk in the footsteps of Abraham's faith?

1. We should walk humbly before God because of His gracious mercy on us (He justifies us . . . even though we were not "good" people).
2. We should live joyfully because of His great blessing on us (He approves us . . . even though we were not "approved" people).
3. We should live harmoniously and graciously in the light of our common standing before God and with others (He unifies us . . . there are no "favorite" people)

And what this produces in the life of someone who has received and is enjoying these blessings is deep, unquenchable joy amid life's darkest and hardest times as we follow in the footsteps of men like Abraham and David (and a whole host of others in Hebrews 12).

No matter what was going on around us
No matter what was happening to us

These "justified by faith" heroes in Hebrews 11 found unquenchable joy that strengthened their resolve to keep living by faith rather than by sight, to continue obeying God, and to trust Him for future joys and lasting treasures that are yet to be seen or experienced.

- When "justified by faith" people sin, they want God to restore their joy.

- When they suffer, they trust God to sustain this joy.
- When they worship, they proclaim this joy.
- When they live, they display this joy.
- When they die, they validate this joy.