

A Sermon by  
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Chinese Christian Church  
of New Jersey

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# What is Required of Man

ROMANS 4:1-25

One reason why preaching or teaching through Romans is not easy is because Paul's letter to the Romans deals with issues that have always been and always will be controversial. Regardless of how you and I interpret what Romans says, there will always be others who have a different point of view.

And sometimes the different points of view do not mean that one person is right and one person is wrong. George V. Denny, Jr., founder and moderator of the *Town Meeting of the Air* had a little ball that he liked to display when the question of differences between people came up for discussion. Grasping the ball tightly in his hand, he would ask, "What color is it?" The person questioned would take a quick look and answer: "Black."

Denny then shook his head. "The part I see is white." He would then give the ball a turn to show the other half was white.

"We could never agree on the color of this ball," he pointed out, "unless you knew my point of view, and unless I realized you were looking at it from another point of view. Many disagreements could be settled if people would only look at both sides of the ball."

In today's message I will be emphasizing the words *justification* and *faith*. I will be looking at one side of the ball that we can label as "The Gospel." But there is another side of the ball. There is another way you can look at salvation. You can talk about salvation in terms of our present and ongoing need to become more godly and holy than what we are. In today's message I will not be emphasizing the words *sanctification* and *obedience*. I will pick up on those themes on another day. Nevertheless, I do recognize those themes to be just as much a part of the gospel as the themes of justification and faith.

Unfortunately not all disagreements are just a matter of two people looking at the same truth from two different points of view. There are times when there is a clear difference of opinion on what actually is true and what is false. Let's take, for example, the question of how people are made right with God. Assuming we all agree that God exists and that all men need to be made right with God, we are then faced with the question of how people are made right with God. And you don't have to ask too many people that question before you realize that there are serious disagreements even among people who profess to be Christian.

And when such disagreements over spiritual issues arise, the only possible ground of appeal in the heat of controversy is the scriptural record. Only when two people first agree that the Biblical record is true and authoritative can there be any hope of working out an agreement. I believe in the authority of the Bible, so when a person opens up the Bible and says, 'Based on these passages of the Bible, this is what I believe,' I will pay

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attention to what the person has to say. For me to believe what he is saying there has to be reason; that is, there has to be a reasonable connection between the scripture and the thought he is trying to get across. Without the connection, I will not be convinced.

When the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, he was very concerned with the question of how people are made right with God. Paul knew that a certain portion of the people reading his letter were from a Jewish background. He, himself, was from a Jewish background. He understood how they thought, because he used to think the same way. And so the first thing he did after giving his brief introduction of the gospel, recorded in ROMANS 3:21-31, was to appeal to the Old Testament scripture to support his viewpoint.

It would be foolish for us to think that what this former Pharisee shared in his letter to the Romans was something that developed overnight. His thoughts were anything but spontaneous. The development of Paul's comprehension that Jesus Christ is the only One who can make people right with God was not sudden. It was at least fourteen to seventeen years after his conversion before the Holy Spirit singled him out and sent him on his Gentile mission (ACTS 13:1-4). What he was writing to Rome now was what the Spirit had taught him during a long period of waiting and mental struggle. His thoughts had been tested in Damascus (ACTS 9:19-22). They had been scrutinized thoroughly in Jerusalem (GALATIANS 1:18-25), and they had been brought under fire in Antioch (GALATIANS 2:9-14). Paul had paid the price to know his Lord; he bore on his body the "marks of Jesus" (GALATIANS 6:17).

And so we now turn to a portion of a letter that was written to convince people who were not yet convinced. We will never know if the entire Jewish element of the Roman congregation became convinced after they read the letter, and we don't need to know. The letter is now speaking to us. We are now the ones who need to be convinced. Paul's appeal to the Old Testament scripture backed by clear reason is now placed before us to consider.

When the Apostle Paul gave a brief summary of the gospel in ROMANS 3:21-31, he was basically introducing people to the good news that it is possible to be made right with God. He told them that in order for people to be made right with God, something is required of God and something is required of man. The something that is required of God is propitiation and forgiveness. The thing that is required of man is faith. A certain person can only be made right with God after these two requirements have been met.

The phrase "justification by faith" is a neat way of using three words to summarize what is required of God and what is required of man. Justification by faith happens when God satisfies His justice through the blood of Jesus Christ and man believes in or embraces what God has done to satisfy His own justice.

It's not hard to understand why some of the Jewish element of the Roman congregation would have had trouble with the idea of justification by faith. The teaching that had been handed down to them and their ancestors for centuries was that justification took place through the sacrifice of animals on an altar and that being made right with God depended on doing a lot of good things and being circumcised and strictly observing the law. The idea that what is required of man is faith would have been very difficult for the average Jewish person to accept.

So, it is in the context of this very big difference of opinion on the issue of what is required of man to be made right with God that Paul appeals to scripture. He deals with the issues one at a time. **The first issue is the issue of works, and it is dealt with in ROMANS 4:1-8.** And to prove that people are made right with God by faith and not works, we are asked to consider two famous Israeli leaders.

If Paul had been using our modern-day Bible, he could have said, "Please turn to GENESIS 15:6." That verse says, "Abram believed the Lord, and he (God) credited it to him as righteousness." Those words were referring to Abraham's belief that God would provide him with an heir in his old age, and from that heir there would come a whole multitude of people.

There was absolutely nothing that Abraham could do to make the promise happen. He was an old man with a barren wife. It's easy to believe a certain thing can happen when we understand that it is humanly possible to make it happen. But what God was proposing to Abraham was something that was humanly impossible. The kind of faith that makes a person right with God must begin at this point. We must have a vision of what God says should happen or will happen, and we must realize that what God says should happen or will happen is humanly impossible.

Many people miss this point when they study or memorize the Ten Commandments. They make the mistake of looking at the Ten Commandments as standards that are humanly possible to achieve. Rabbinical Judaism went to great lengths to make the standards humanly possible to achieve. But, by doing so, people missed the point. It is humanly impossible to obey the commands of God. We will never understand faith unless we admit this fact and feel humbled by it.

Abraham had nothing to boast about and he knew it. Yet he still believed, and God credited his belief as righteousness. Subsequent to his belief, God's power worked in his body and the body of his wife in such a way as to cause the words of the promise to come true.

The one who comes to God brings nothing; therefore, he deserves nothing. He does nothing; therefore, he earns nothing. He clings to the cross because it represents the payment of his penalty. He puts his confidence in Christ, because God has declared Jesus to be his righteousness. Only after believing can he experience the power to do God's will. There can be no potential for good works outside of His power. God helps those who come to the conclusion that they can't help themselves.

In ROMANS 4:6-8 the Apostle Paul calls another of Israel's great men, David, to bear witness to the same principle. If Romans were written today, Paul might have first cited the reference by saying, "Now look at PSALM 32:1-2." "Blessed are they whose offenses have been forgiven and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

David's peace with God had been destroyed by his own acts of evil. David knew that no slaying of an animal at the altar could make him right with God. He was unfit to be Israel's leader, and he knew it. It was humanly impossible for David to rid himself of all the guilt and shame he was experiencing. Blessedness for David was forgiveness. David believed that God could forgive him and give him the joy of a restored status with God.

So the first way Paul used the scriptures was to call up two very important people to serve as witnesses to the truth that justification comes by faith and not by works.

Now he had to move on to another issue. It is the issue of circumcision. Paul knew that many of his readers believed that circumcision was a requirement for being made right with God, and that it was impossible for people (like the Gentiles) who had never been circumcised to be made right with God.

**And so we find that the next section of ROMANS 4, that is verses 9-12, deals with the issue of circumcision.** Paul knew that the incident which took place in GENESIS 15 happened when Abraham was around eighty-five years of age, give or take a year for the Hagar incident (GENESIS 16:16). But it was not until Abraham was ninety-nine years old that God instituted the rite of circumcision for the male members of his household (GENESIS 17:1, 10-14). Therefore, there were at least fourteen years when Abraham's faith was reckoned as righteousness before circumcision entered the picture. So what is the purpose of circumcision? In ROMANS 4:11 Paul uses two words to summarize the purpose: sign and seal.

Circumcision, like water baptism, was meant to be a visible sign that bore witness to something that already existed. It did not produce the relationship, nor did it guarantee it. It acknowledged an already existing fact. The word "seal" is used to emphasize that what you have is the real thing.

It is important to God that people who have experienced the real thing participate in a visible rite to show that the righteousness they have is real. The parallel between circumcision and water baptism should be obvious. God still demands that people who have been justified and made right with God participate in a rite or ceremony to serve as a sign or seal that what they have experienced is the real thing. The fact that many people who have not experienced the real thing participate in the ceremony should not cause us to misunderstand its purpose. The sign and seal do not make our righteousness real. They are to be meant to testify that what we already have is real. The thing that is required of man to experience righteousness is faith. It is not circumcision nor is it water baptism.

The reason why a certain person can say, "Abraham is my father," is not because he has been circumcised or baptized with water or is a member of a certain race of people. It is because that person believes as Abraham believed. Ours is a genealogy of faith, not of race.

In ROMANS 4 Paul takes an issue-by-issue approach to Judaism. So far we have seen him use scripture to prove that the Old Testament patriarchs were made right with God through faith and not works. Then he used scripture to prove that circumcision was meant to be a sign and a seal of something that already happened. **Now, in ROMANS 4:13-17 he turns to the issue of legalism. Paul disputes the whole idea that the law can make people right with God.** Again, the life of Abraham is a key to his argument. Abraham was justified by his faith in God's promise 430 years before the law entered into the picture (GALATIANS 3:15-18). That is the first thing we must consider.

The second thing has to do with the purpose of the law. The purpose of the law is good. It is informative, and it is also binding. It provides a ground for judgment. It gives substance to the whole principle of wrath. That is the purpose of the law.

But the law is not a redeemer. It cannot give a person the inner power needed to obey. People who seek justification by faith discover the creative, life-giving activity of God in the inner man. People who seek justification through the law place all the emphasis on the external. They must work at manipulating behavior in an attempt to impress God.

Another big difference between faith and law is brought out in ROMANS 4:16-17. Faith is inclusive while legalism is exclusive. If Abraham was justified by faith, then anyone who believes like he did is considered his offspring. But if Abraham was justified through a legalistic approach to the ceremonial and civil laws of the Old Testament, then only those who do the same can be considered his offspring. That would basically exclude anyone outside of the nation of Israel. But what does the Old Testament record say about Abraham? GENESIS 17:5 says, "I have made you a father of many nations." It is the universal principle of faith, and not a legalistic approach to the law that makes Abraham our father.

It is not bad for churches to have traditions and rules and regulations. But abiding by the rules does not make us righteous. Nor does failing to abide by the rules mean that we are not righteous.

There is a story about a college student named Bill written by Rebecca Pippert. Bill became a Christian while attending college. At the time he became a Christian, Bill had wild hair, wore a T-shirt with holes in it, blue jeans and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his whole four years of college.

Across the street from the campus where Bill went to school was a church full of well-dressed, middle-class people. They wanted to develop a ministry to the college students, but they were not sure how to go about it.

One day, Bill decided to worship there. He walked into the church, complete with wild hair, T-shirt, blue jeans and bare feet. The church was completely packed, and the service had already begun. Bill started down the aisle to find a place to sit. By now the people were looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one said anything.

As Bill moved closer and closer to the pulpit, he realized there were no empty seats. So he squatted and sat down on the carpet right up front. That kind of behavior would have been perfectly acceptable at a college fellowship meeting, but this particular congregation had never witnessed it before. By now, the people seemed uptight, and the tension in the air was thickening.

Right about the time Bill sat down, a deacon began slowly making his way down the aisle from the back of the sanctuary. The deacon was in his eighties, had silver-gray hair, a three-piece suit and a pocket watch. He was a godly man—very elegant, dignified and courtly. He walked with a cane and, as he neared the boy, church members thought, *You can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and background to understand some college kid on the floor?*

It took a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church was utterly silent except for the clicking of his cane. You couldn't even hear anyone breathing. All eyes were on the deacon.

But then they saw the elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty, he sat down on the floor next to Bill and worshiped with him. Everyone in the congregation choked up with emotion. When the minister gained control, he told the people, "What I am about to preach, you will never remember. What you've just seen, you will never forget."

A man is justified by his faith in God—not by works, not by circumcision, and not by law. This of course raises a very serious question in the minds of many people. They say that it sounds too easy and that it makes righteousness cheap.

But just the opposite is true. The price God paid to make us just and right with Him was not a cheap price. It cost Him the life of His Son. And the faith that is required of us is not a cheap substitute for obedience. It is the only thing that can produce the power needed to obey. **Faith must have an affect on a person's behavior; otherwise, it is not faith. This point is emphasized in ROMANS 4:18-22.** In this section we deal with the rest of Abraham's story, that is what happened to him after he initially believed in the promise of God.

This section of scripture does not give us a picture of a perfect person. Abraham never reached perfection. His bad decision to follow Sarah's advice to have a child by Hagar is an example of failure, not perfection. His old body was also an example of weakness and not strength. So the picture we have in this section of scripture is a picture of a person who, despite all of his own weaknesses and failures, he does not lose hope in the promise of God. It is the picture of a person who never quit. The faith that he had produced hope in the face of bad news. It produced perseverance in spite of the facts about his body that were not good. And it produced in him the ability to worship a God who was able even before the promise was fulfilled. So ROMANS 4:22 concludes, 'this is why His faith was credited to him as righteousness.' It was credited to him as righteousness because it was real faith. And the fact that it was real is evidenced in behavior.

Many people get excited when they begin to comprehend the fact that God loves them and has a plan for their lives. In their excitement they begin to serve God the best they can. But then things happen. Failures and criticism and all kinds of circumstances tempt them to think that just maybe there is no plan. And so they lose hope and they lose their motivation and they stop trying and they stop worshiping.

I am so glad that Abraham, the "father of faith" was not a perfect man. I am so glad that the Biblical narrative did not spare him by leaving out all of his faults and his mistakes. The reason why he still is the father of faith today is because his faith produced hope that never gave up and worship that never ceased. It was real faith.

**The final words recorded in the fourth chapter of Romans (that is ROMANS 4:23-25) build a bridge to the present.** Everyone reading the book of Romans must be

challenged that the kind of faith Abraham experienced is not confined to any individual or race or period of history. It requires only a response of the human heart to truth.

God has been progressively revealing truth to people throughout the ages. Those of us in this room have a lot more truth about God revealed to us than Abraham ever had. But the dynamics of faith are the same. Abraham had to be persuaded that God would fulfill His promise to give him a son and make him a father of many nations. We must also be persuaded about the truth that God has revealed to us. We must be personally persuaded that Christ died and rose again for every man and that He died and rose again for me. We must individualize and personalize the promise of salvation. No other truth will come in the future that will surpass this truth, and it has been revealed to all of us in this room. What are we doing with it?

We can't really believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ without it having an affect on us in the present. Faith that does not have an affect on behavior is not real faith. And it is only real faith that can make us right with God. It is not good works. It is not water baptism. No legalistic effort on our part to obey a lot of rules will make us right with God. It is only a faith producing hope that will not quit and worship that will not cease that can make us right with God.

This teaching about faith is not only written for the sake of those living in the days of Abraham and the for the sake of those living when Romans was first written. It was written for our sakes as well. The principle of justification by faith has been the same throughout the ages. It has never changed. The amount of revelation varies, but the principle stays the same.