JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

Romans 3:27–4:25

Key Verse: 3:28

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”

What do you think of your relationship with God? Are you close? Distant? Is the relationship a bit rocky? Few people are actually concerned about this; frankly, most don’t care, because in their hearts they don’t really believe there is a God. Some assume it’s not possible to know God or get close to him, because he’s so great, so far removed, so holy, and we’re so sinful. Based on what Paul’s been saying, there’s some truth in that. Some think it’s all just a human invention; they reject organized religion and invent their own version of God. Many believe they’re basically good people, so God *must* like them. They try to do good things, be good to others, maybe even read the Bible and keep a few religious rules to stay in God’s good graces. But does it work? According to today’s passage, no. So, why does our relationship with God matter? First of all, it’s because, no matter what people say, God is real. Second, it’s because God made each human being to live in relationship with him. This is why Romans tells us we’re either living under God’s wrath, or we’re “righteous” before him, meaning we have a right relationship, a real relationship, a close relationship.

In 3:21–26 Paul has just explained the core of the gospel. Though we have no righteousness of our own, God makes us righteous through our faith in Jesus. Jesus suffered and died on a cross to redeem us; he shed his blood to turn God’s wrath away from us. When we receive his blood by faith, God justifies us. God gives us his own righteousness as a gift of his grace. God makes us right with him, close to him, as we learn to live by faith in what Jesus did for us. In today’s passage Paul explains why God gives us his righteousness only by faith. He also shows how to live by faith practically, giving us some great examples. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words.

**First**, no boasting (3:27; 4:2). Read 3:27. Here the word “law” means “principle.” The first principle in living by faith is “no boasting.” Paul has mentioned boasting twice before (2:17,23). Now he mentions it here (27), and again in 4:2. He’s not talking about boasting generally, but boasting about what we know or do for God, the laws we think we’ve kept or the good works we think we’ve done. It’s very serious because, as Paul says elsewhere, as soon as we start boasting in what we do, we break our relationship with Jesus and actually fall away from his grace (Gal5:4). To live by faith, we’ve got to thoroughly get rid of any self-boasting lurking in our hearts. What we know or do doesn’t make us any bit closer to God, or any bit better than anyone else, because we’re all sinners (3:23).

In Christ we live by a new law, “the law of faith.” What does this mean? It means to be totally humble before God, because we’re putting our faith only in his grace, not in anything we are or do in this world (Gal6:14). It also makes us the same as anyone else who lives by faith, regardless of their appearance, race, abilities, success or failure, whether they’ve been very religious or very sinful—if they believe in Jesus, they’re living by faith just as we are. May God help us repent of our boasting and build a community that practices this law of faith.

**Second**, not by works. Read verse 28. “Not by works” is Paul’s second principle in living by faith. He’s repeating what he said in 3:22 and 1:17. In today’s passage he uses this word “justify” four more times (3:30; 4:2,5,25). Being justified only by faith is the main theme of today’s passage, and in fact, it’s the main theme of the whole Book of Romans. Paul adds in 3:28, “apart from works of the law.” He says this more fully in Galatians 2:16: “…yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

Paul mentions these “works” again in 4:2,4,5, and 6. He’s speaking to a tendency in Christianity since its beginning. In the early church Jews were adding circumcision, Kosher foods and Jewish sacred days to the pure gospel. Later, the Catholic church added the seven sacraments and confession to a priest. Not too long ago Protestants in the U.S. added not to drink or smoke or go to movies or dances or use make-up. In our own ministry, we might be turning really good things like Bible study or prayer or sharing our faith or world mission into laws, hurrying people into doing things before their faith in Jesus is even real. By doing such things people start thinking they’re making themselves right with God, when they haven’t really met Christ personally. Read verse 28 again. All people need is real faith in Christ to be justified—no other work or law.

**Third**, all people can live by faith (29–31). Read verses 29,30. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (11:13), shares passionately that justification by faith is God’s universal solution for the universal problem of sin. God really wants to save all the people he made. When we keep this as the focus of our ministry, we’ll reach more and more people today with the good news of Jesus. Look at verse 31. Paul anticipates the Jews’ criticism that he’s trying to overthrow “the law,” meaning God’s moral laws in the Bible. On the contrary, Paul says here, “we uphold the law.” He’s going to develop this more, later on in the letter.

**Fourth**, Abraham’s example of faith (4:1–3). Read 4:1–3. Paul is quoting from Genesis 15. Genesis 12–14 records Abraham’s initial struggle of faith. By faith he obeyed God and went, though he didn’t know where he was going (Heb11:8). By faith in God’s promise he gave the best of the land to his nephew Lot. By faith he fought a war to rescue Lot from enemies. He was trying to hold onto Lot as his hope, but Lot didn’t follow him. Abraham started complaining to God that he had no heir. Then God took him outside and showed him the stars in the night sky. God told him, “So shall your offspring be.” Genesis 15:6 says, “And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” Paul uses this pivotal Bible verse to support his point and show us what it really means to live by faith. Abraham had only God’s promise, holding nothing else in his hands. But after seeing all the stars in the sky which God had made, he believed the Lord. He trusted God fully. His relationship with God became real. On the basis of this fact alone, God counted it to him as righteousness. Paul’s teaching on being justified by faith was not new at all. He’s going to develop this more later on.

**Fifth**, faith in God’s forgiveness (4–8). Read verses 4,5. Paul is saying that if we work hard to earn God’s favor, God is obligated to us. But God isn’t obligated to us at all. On the contrary, God is the God who “justifies the ungodly.” Paul says later in 5:8, “…but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God wants to give us his forgiveness in Christ as a gift. Read verses 6–8. Here Paul is quoting from Psalm 32. Again, the key word here is “count.” God counted David as righteous because he put all his trust in God’s forgiveness despite his severe sins of even adultery and murder. It’s an example for anyone, no matter what they’ve done or how badly they’ve failed, that they can experience God’s forgiveness in Jesus by faith.

**Sixth**, not circumcision but walking in Abraham’s footsteps of faith (9–12). In verse 10 Paul points out that Abraham’s faith was counted as righteousness before he was circumcised. For Paul this proves that circumcision isn’t necessary to be justified in God’s sight. Whether people have been circumcised or not, what we all need to do is learn to walk in Abraham’s footsteps of faith (12). It tells us that faith isn’t just about believing something in our minds, it’s about walking or living out our faith in our daily lives. As Christians we start out as spiritual babies, then learn to crawl, then walk. We get spiritually stronger and more mature as we learn to put our faith into practice in real life. Instead of trying to keep laws every day, we need to be thinking how to exercise our faith every day.

**Seventh**, believe God’s promise that rests on grace (13–16). In these verses Paul stresses that God didn’t give Abraham his promise through the law. Instead, he says, the promise rests on grace (16). Why did God give his promise based on grace, not law? It was because he wanted to guarantee his righteousness to all people who live by faith. In this way Abraham became our spiritual father also. We learn from him how to believe God’s promise of grace to us in Jesus.

**Eighth**, fully convinced that God is able (17–22). Here Paul especially stresses the quality of Abraham’s faith. When God gave him his promise, Abraham was so old that he was almost dead, and he had no existing son as his heir (17). Read verse 18. This shows us that it was God’s promise alone that gave Abraham hope. In hope he believed against hope. Read verse 19. Abraham’s faith was not detached from reality: he considered the cold realities that his body was as good as dead and that Sarah’s womb was barren. So how could he believe in such a hard reality? Read verses 20,21. The hardships only made his faith get stronger. His faith grew to the level of giving glory to God. This is why Paul says in 1:17 that righteousness is “from faith for faith”—meaning it grows in its depth and purity. Abraham was fully convinced that God is able to do what he promised.

As we struggle to live as Christians, we’re so weak. Our sins are real, and they’re chronic. We fail in so many ways. But living by faith means looking up to God who is able to do what he promised. It’s not about our ability or performance at all. It’s about God who is able. God is able to justify us, to forgive us, and help us grow until we really do experience his salvation in Jesus.

**Ninth**, believing his death and resurrection (23–25). In order to be justified, in order to be right with God, close to God, what should the object of our faith be? Look at verses 24,25. We believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. In other words, we live by faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Because Jesus died and rose again, God can forgive all our sins and justify us fully. Living by faith means holding on to God’s promise to us in Jesus’ death and resurrection. We may not feel close to him at the moment, but by faith in the gospel of Jesus, in what *he* did, we *are* close to him.

Today we learned what living by faith means: no boasting, not by works, believing all people can live by faith, believing God’s promise like Abraham, believing God’s forgiveness like David, learning to walk in the footsteps of faith, believing that God’s promise rests on grace, being fully convinced that God is able to save us in Jesus, and especially, believing in our Lord Jesus’ death and resurrection for us. Through this Romans study may God bless each of us to experience justification by faith in Jesus. May we learn more deeply how to really live by faith in this grace. As we do, may we enjoy being really close with God personally.