

HOW CAN I BE ACCEPTED BY GOD?

Romans 4:1-16

Good morning! We're on the 10th part of our series on the Book of Romans I'm calling, "Power to Change". This morning, I want to talk about the issue "How can I be accepted by God?" That's a very crucial question. It's asked many different ways. Some people would phrase it like this: How do I get to heaven? What will I do that will please God? How can I be right with God?

Romans 3:28 answers this for us. *"For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law."* The only way we can be accepted by God is by faith.

Paul, being a master teacher, uses a very effective teaching tool to reinforce this truth. It's called an illustration. Paul knows we learn by illustration. He gives the example of Abraham to tell us what he's just said in the previous chapter.

Now, every good teacher knows that illustrations are crucial to keep people interested and listening. The moment I start telling a story I get everyone's attention. Especially if it's a joke. But I don't have a joke for you today. We'll be serious this morning. Spurgeon said "Illustrations are like windows. They let light in." Even in a very heavy doctrinal book, Paul stops right in the middle of it and gives an example.

Romans 4 is an example. He selects his example with care. He chooses Abraham, a man all of us can relate to. Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation. Paul says Abraham is the original Jew. Through Isaac, Abraham's son, the Jewish nation was born. But do you know he is also the father of the Arab nation? Ishmael came before Isaac and he was driven out together with Hagar his mom to the wilderness by Abraham through the urging of Sarah. So, all the feud in the

Middle East is really just a family feud -- between stepbrothers. Arabs and Israelites are really related. They both can trace themselves back to Abraham.

Abraham is the father of Islam and Judaism. As we get into this chapter, we'll see he's also the father of Christians. Three great religions look back to Abraham.

Now, Abraham was born in the city of Ur in the Mesopotamian valley. **Ur of the Chaldees.** In Ur, he was a moon worshiper. That's what they worshiped in Ur -- the moon. One day the true God, Yahweh, spoke to him and said, "Abram, take all your family and move." Abram said, "Where are we going?" God said, "I'll tell you when you get there." How's that for directions? But by faith he moved. God promised out of this one man He would make a great nation -- the nation of Israel.

Now there are two key words I want you to note:

Justified -- to be acquitted, declared not guilty, in other words, completely **accepted by God.** God becomes my friend, not my enemy. Wouldn't you like to be God's friend? How do I become acceptable to God? How do I become friends with God rather than an enemy? Justified -- *Just as if I'd* never sinned. God makes us as if we'd never broken any laws. He sees us perfect and complete.

This is an important word. It gives us a sense of worth. You find your acceptance in God and when you find it there you will find self-acceptance.

Another word is

Credited (computed, calculated) -- in the KJV it's translated "counted" or sometimes "reckoned". It's a bookkeeping term. It literally means to compute or to calculate.

So, God calculates our sin and God calculates what Jesus did on the cross and computes them together and says one cancels out the other. God looks at our sin and then looks at what Jesus did and calculates them together and says -- it's even.

He looks in the debit column at our sins and the credit column at God's righteousness through Jesus and the books balance at the end. I like the saying that goes, "Jesus paid a debt He didn't owe because we owed a debt we couldn't pay."

Now, we come to answer the question

I. HOW CAN I BE ACCEPTED BY GOD?

We'll see the importance of the two words we just studied in Abraham's life. Paul clears up any misunderstanding about how we're saved. I know you're thinking Paul is like a broken record. But that is his style. He has to repeat it over and over because it is so important he doesn't want any of his readers to miss it. This is a radical concept, you see. It was back then, it still is now. So, we start in verses 1 and 2, *"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God."*

How can I be accepted by God? First, let's look at how we are not accepted.

1. I am not accepted by God by doing good works.

Paul uses a "what if" argument. Just suppose you could be saved by doing good. If you could be saved by working for it, then you could brag about it. You see, you can always tell when somebody is trying to work their way to heaven -- they tell you about it. Paul says, *"...but not before God."* You may be able to brag about it before people. They may be impressed, and they may even applaud it, but God's standards are still so much higher that you could never measure up to it. It doesn't impress God. You cannot impress God! Why? Because He knows our motives. He knows no matter what we're doing in public He knows how we are in private. God is not impressed.

God says, Sorry, you don't find your self worth, your acceptance in achievements or accomplishments. That's not the way to feel good about yourself. If you build your self worth on your record, your performance, somebody is going to do better and then you're in trouble. You may impress other people but you're not going to impress God. You cannot find your self worth just on what you accomplish because there's always somebody that's doing better.

There is another way to find acceptance before God.

v. 3 *“What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”* It was Abraham's belief, his faith, that made him righteous. Genesis 15 gives the actual account of how God dealt with Abraham. God said that he was going to make his descendants into a great nation. Abraham was 85 years old and didn't have any kids and God says, “You are going to be a great nation”. Genesis 15:5 says, *“He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”* Then, in verse 6, we read, *“Abram (that was his original name before God changed it to Abraham) believed the Lord and it was accredited to him as righteousness.”* (Gen. 15:6) That's the first time the word believe is used in the Bible. The word in Hebrew is literally "to say Amen". Amen means "so be it... I agree". God gave Abraham a promise and Abraham said, "Amen, God." God said, "Abraham you're going to have a lot of kids, a lot of descendants." Abraham said, "Amen, God. So be it." He believed God. It was his belief that credited him righteousness.

Theologians call this **imputed righteousness**. **Imputation means imparted, provided for, on behalf of.** Thus, Jesus's imputed righteousness means that a swap took place. He received what we deserved because our sinfulness and its consequences were imputed to His account. And in return He imputed to us His

righteousness into our accounts. In short, he became our sinfulness, we became His righteousness. All of His perfection, sinlessness, godliness, etc is credited to us. We are “in” Christ.

Abraham didn't deserve God's righteousness. Did Abraham earn this privilege? The Bible says God just chose him. He said, "I'm going to use you to be the father of a great nation." How would you respond if you were 85 years old and God said you're going to have a kid? We know how Sarah responded. She was over 80 years old. She laughed. We know she didn't believe God because an 80 year old woman, if she found out she was going to have a child, would not laugh -- she would cry!

In time, she delivered a baby and named him Isaac which means laughter. She wanted others to know that the child was a miracle baby. Why did God give them a baby? Because God had a plan for Abraham. This plan had nothing to do with who or what Abraham was. God just chose Abraham to be the father of a great nation.

Abraham wasn't saved or justified by works. He believed. He had faith. Then Paul adds another illustration. *v. 4 "Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness."*

Those of you who go out to work, you work your 8 hours a day and at the end of the pay period, your boss gives you your paycheck. Do you consider it a gift? It's no gift! Or on April 14 when you sit down to do your taxes do you try to convince the IRS that all your paychecks were gifts? Do you think you could? No, you put in a certain amount of energy and time, you receive a certain amount of benefit. It's not a gift, it's wages.

How could salvation be a gift if you work for it? But the Bible says in **Romans 3:23 "The wages of sin is death"**. We get our condemnation the old-fashioned way -- we earn it! **"But the gift of God is eternal life."** Wages are something you deserve. A gift is something you don't deserve. God justifies us as a gift.

Now, in **v. 5 " However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness."** So, the ungodly sinner who trusts God, that faith in God is credited as righteousness. When you have faith it goes in the credit column. That faith in Christ cancels out all of the negative things, the sins in your life.

Many Christians fall into this trap. They start out by accepting God as a free gift and then think, "Now that I'm a Christian I've got to earn God's favor through works." They start off one way and then slowly go over to the other way. Yes, I believe. I receive the free gift. Now that I'm a Christian, I've got to earn God's favor and in order to be accepted by God I must have a quiet time, memorize scripture, read the Bible, pray, witness three times a day, go to church...don't wear makeup, don't play cards... whatever you happen to want to put on your list. We get this list of things that's going to make us acceptable to God. The Bible says the very way we are saved is the very way we continue the Christian life. It's a gift.

The bottom line is this: There is nothing that you can do that is going to make God love you more. If you're a Christian, there is nothing you can do that can make God love you less. That's an amazing truth! God loves you just as much on your bad days as on your good days. It's credited according to your faith, not according to your works.

If that's the case, why don't I just go out and live any way I want to live? Just try it. God will still love you. That doesn't mean He won't discipline you. I love

my kids, but do you think I let them get away when they misbehave? Does that mean I don't love them? No. I discipline them because I love them.

Now, Paul gives another example in the life of David in verse 6. Paul is pulling out the heavyweights. Abraham is kind of like the George Washington of the Hebrew nation. David is the Lincoln. These are the double heavyweights in Jewish history. There is no one else he could appeal to with strong argument.

v. 6, “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.’” This is a quote from Psalm 32. Psalm 32 is one of the Psalms of confession after David had murdered Uriah and committed adultery with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. David said, I got myself in such a mess because of my sin but God cleared my record just because I believed.

The guilt is canceled, forgiven, forgotten. If you're a believer, God does not hold your sin against you. It says they are covered. They are not counted against you. "You mean when I get to heaven God's not going to say anything about all those bad things I did?" No, He's not. God keeps a record of your works for rewards but God does not keep a record of your sins if you're a Christian. Because they've all been covered by the cross. Every sin you'll ever commit has already been paid for.

Then what is the purpose of confessing my sins? Simply for fellowship with God here and now. It doesn't make me unsaved. What it does is that it restores my fellowship with God. You see, if you're a Christian, and you commit a sin, you know it's wrong because the Holy Spirit rebukes you. He'll continue to rebuke you until you become uncomfortable until you confess it. We call that guilty conscience. Guilty conscience makes you avoid God. Thus, fellowship is broken.

But the Bible says, God disciplines those he loves. He loves you despite your sin and wants to restore the fellowship with you.

I am not accepted by God by doing good works.

2. I am not accepted by religious rituals.

In verse 9, Paul talks about circumcision again. I told you he keeps repeating things. He talked about the Jewish rite of circumcision in chapter two. In review, circumcision was the most important symbol of the Jewish nation. The Jews said, it doesn't matter who your parents are, if you're not circumcised you're not a Jew. Even if you're born to Jewish parents. But how about girls? Jews believe that girls are naturally and spiritually circumcised through their circumcised fathers. So, they thought circumcision -- this ritual -- was a passport to heaven automatically. Paul says that's an error for two reasons. He says in v. 9 *"Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!"*

Remember in *Genesis 15:6, "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."* Abraham was still not a Jew at this point. Abraham didn't become a Jew until he was circumcised. When did that happen? *Genesis 17:23 "On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him."* That was the start of this Jewish ritual.

So, God declared Abraham righteous in Genesis 15. He was 85 yo. In chapter 17, when he started the rite of circumcision, he was 99. It's 14 years later. Paul is blowing the minds of the Jews that believed the only way you get to heaven is by being circumcised. He's saying, "Read your Bible. God said to Abraham, "You're

righteous", 44 years before this ritual was even developed." Abraham was a Gentile and then he became a Jew. He came out of Ur of the Chaldees.

The second reason why this ritual doesn't work with regards to salvation is in v. 11 *"And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them."* Circumcision then is a symbol, not a cause. It's a symbol of your faith, not a cause of your faith.

The modern counterpart of circumcision is baptism. Baptism doesn't make you a believer, it shows you are a believer. Baptism is like the wedding ring. This ring doesn't make me married, it shows that I am married. What makes me married is the commitment in my heart. The ring is the outward sign of the inward commitment. Baptism doesn't make you a Christian, it shows you are a Christian. Rituals are signs, but they're simply signs. They're seals that say, "This is approved." It doesn't make it approved; it shows that it is approved.

v. 12 *"And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised."* It's saying Abraham became a believer before he was a Jew. Paul is saying that God said to Abraham, "You're OK. You're righteous because of your faith" -- 14 years before he became a Jew. Therefore, he is not only the father of the Jews, he's the father of everybody who believes whether he's gone through a Jewish ritual or not.

I am not accepted by God by my works, nor by religious rituals.

3. I am not accepted by God by keeping the law.

Again, Paul has already talked about this. He uses Abraham again as an example. v. 13 *"It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring*

received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith."

Why does he use Abraham as an example of somebody who was saved without keeping the law? Because Abraham lived 430 years before the Ten Commandments were given. How could Abraham be saved by keeping the Jewish law when there wasn't any law until 430 years later when Moses gave it? He's using Abraham to say, "Those of you who think you're going to make it to heaven by keeping all the rules of the Bible, realize that Abraham had it made before the laws were even given!"

What is the purpose of the Law? *v. 14 "For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression."* If there is no law to break then you don't have any lawbreakers. There is something about human nature that the moment a law is established they have a desire to break it. It's like when God told Adam and Even, "You can eat anything in the entire garden except one little tree." Which one did they want to go taste? They immediately headed for that one. It's like when you see a sign that says, "Don't touch the wet paint!" or "Keep off the grass." Where there is no law there is no transgression. The only way we can keep from breaking the Law is to have no Law. The purpose of the Law was never to save anybody; it was to show that we needed to be saved. It was just to show how we don't measure up. The Law doesn't save anybody. It just shows us where we blow it!

Look at Galatians 3:17. Here is a much fuller description of what Paul is saying in Romans 4. *"What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise."* What is the promise? That he'll become a great nation. One of

that seed will bless the entire world. That promise was not based on Abraham keeping the Law. The Law hadn't been given. It was an unconditional promise.

v. 19 " *Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.*" He goes on and talks about that the purpose of the Law is simply to show us where we fall short.

We can't be acceptable to God through doing good works and we can't be acceptable to God through ritual and we're not made acceptable to God by keeping the Laws. There is only one way we can be acceptable to God. That's faith.

4. I am accepted by God by faith.

He's said it over and over and over. It is by faith. Somebody is going to say to you someday "What about James 2?" When you read James 2 it sounds like a flat-out contradiction of what Paul is saying in Romans 4 until you understand it.

James 2:21-24 James talks about Abraham also and quotes even the same verse.

"Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone." Does that sound like a contradiction?

It's not a contradiction at all once you understand it. In the first place, James and Paul are talking about two different things. Paul is talking about saving faith, James is talking about growing in faith. Paul is talking about the root of salvation, James is talking about the fruit of salvation. How do we know? Because they're talking about different instances. In Romans, Paul says, Abraham believed God

and he was accepted as righteous. He uses as an illustration the promise that God gave him about the sons and the generations to be born. What could Abraham do about that? Absolutely nothing. What do you do with a promise? Just accept it.

James talks about an event that happened 35 years later -- Isaac being offered on the altar. Isaac was not a little boy when he was to be offered as a sacrifice. Most likely he was a young man. Abraham had walked with the Lord for a long time then. James says that is an example of faith.

It's not that faith is the opposite of works. It's not that you have to do faith and works. It's that faith is faith and we demonstrate it by works. It's your faith that saves you but how do you know that you've got any faith if you don't see any actions? Faith is obedience.

For instance, if I were to take you to the Grand Canyon and stretch a rope all the way across and say, "Do you believe you can walk across this rope?" and you say "yes". I don't believe you until you take a step. Like the story of George Blondin many years ago in the 1930's. He was a famous tight rope walker. He stretched a cord across Niagara Falls. He was going to walk across Niagara Falls on a tight rope. Nobody had ever done it before. On the day, there were crowds on both sides. He walked across back and forth several times. Every time, they would shout and cheer. Every time, he'd say, "I'm going to do it again." Finally, he pushed a wheelbarrow full of dirt across. He walked across pushing the wheelbarrow. Blondin sets the wheelbarrow right in front of a tourist. The tourist said, "I believe you could do that 150 times." Blondin replied, "You really believe in me? Get in the wheelbarrow."

That's what James is talking about. Put your money where your mouth is. You say you've got faith? Show it! Prove it! It's not faith plus works. It's that works show your faith. There's no contradiction between James and Romans.

II. WHY DID GOD MAKE OUR ACCEPTANCE BASED ONLY BY OUR FAITH?

Romans 4:14 "*...if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing...*" It's one or the other. You either live by faith or you live by legalism. Why did God make our acceptance based only on faith? Why couldn't we earn it? Why couldn't he make it that we could work for it? Two reasons why God has established that the way you're made acceptable to him is by believing and trusting:

1) To demonstrate God's grace. V. 16, "*Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations."*"

There are two Greek words used in the New Testament for promise. One word literally means a conditional promise: If you do this, I'll do that. The other word is the word that's used here. It's means an unconditional promise: I'm going to do it just because I'm a good God, out of the goodness of my heart whether you respond or not. That's the promise of God. It's not based on your performance. Your salvation is not based on a conditional promise of if you keep working then I'll keep saving. It's a promise, You accept it by faith and it's yours, whether you ever perform or not!

What's the beauty of an unconditional promise? It's not based on performance. It is guaranteed. It comes by faith so "*... so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed..*"

Folks, your salvation is guaranteed. If your acceptance were based on your performance how could you ever be certain that you were going to be saved? How

could you ever have an assurance? You'd always be wondering, Have I done enough? What if I stop working for 10 seconds and then die during that 10 seconds? What if I sin and then all of a sudden die in the middle of the sin? Your acceptance is based on grace so that it is guaranteed.

2) To demonstrate God's power. Next week we'll look at this. v. 17 "*As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.' He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.*" Next week we're going to talk about, How do you believe God for a miracle? Hope you'll keep tuning in as we continue with an exciting topic next week.