



## No Boasting

### Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #22

Romans 3:27-4:25

David Sunday

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We have been talking about justification by faith. What does that mean? It means that no matter who you are or what you have done, you can leave today knowing that you are not guilty in the sight of God. He accounts you blameless for the sake of Christ. It means that if you trust in the fact that Jesus died on the cross for your sin and believe that God raised Him from the dead so that you could be declared righteous in His sight. God instantaneously takes away all the guilt and shame of your sin and clothes you in the righteousness of His Son. You do not have to wait until you die to know whether God will accept you. He says, “Today there can be no condemnation for you in Christ Jesus. Today you can know that your sins are forgiven” (Romans 8:1). He accepts you for the sake of Christ.

Is that good news? That is what we believe and what we preach. It is the joy we have through the gospel. We are seeing these truths in the book of Romans, and today will be the last sermon in this series in the first four chapters of Romans. In September, we will return to Genesis, where we were earlier this year, to look at the life of Abraham. Lord willing, we will then come back to Romans in January and kick it into a lower gear, slowly making our way through the wonderful chapters in the middle of this book—Romans 5-8.

What have we seen so far?

- Romans 1:1-17 shows us that Paul was eager to preach the gospel to all people, because the gospel is the power of God to save everyone who believes and only those who believe. Righteousness from God comes to those who have faith in Jesus Christ.
- In 1:18-3:20, Paul shows us how and why everyone needs this gospel. It is because God's wrath rightly stands against all of humanity, because we are all equally guilty and under the power of sin. That is the bad news.
- Last week, we looked at the wonderful good news that is like dynamite in 3:21-26. But God reveals His righteousness by punishing sin on the cross of Jesus. He put Him

forward to be a propitiation—a sacrifice—that absorbs God’s holy wrath against our sin. Because of this propitiation, God is able to justly justify every sinner who trusts in Jesus.

That is what we have seen so far.

In today’s sermon, which is the final installment in the first four chapters of Romans, we are going to ask the question what does faith in Jesus look like and how can I know if I am living under the influence of justification by faith? This is a large passage that we are going to look at. I have been trying to focus on the main thread of teaching that goes through these first four chapters, trying not to get too bogged down in all of the details.

As I was reading 3:27-31, I kept pondering the relationship of these verses to what follows in Romans 4. As I was reading, it seemed like there was a parallel here. It is as if Paul laid out principles at the end of chapter three, saying, “If you claim to have faith in Jesus, here are some implications of what that will look like in your life.” Then, as I read through chapter four, specifically how Paul used Abraham as an Old Testament example, I kept thinking, “It seems like Paul is taking the same principles that he articulated at the end of chapter three, expanding them in the same order and illustrating them in the life of Abraham.” I thought, “Could it be? Could that really be what is happening here?”

Yesterday I was delighted to hear a sermon by D.A. Carson, who was the professor I was most terrified of in seminary. He said the exact same thing about this passage. He said, “What we have here at the end of chapter three is a set of principles of what faith looks like, and then Paul takes those principles in chapter four and expands upon them, showing how those principles are illustrated in the life of Abraham.” I thought, “Good! I agree with D.A. Carson.” Or D.A. Carson agrees with me!

So what we are going to do is read 3:27-31, and I am going to take you through three principles of what justification by faith looks like in the life of a believer. What is the influence this doctrine should have over our lives? Then we will look through chapter four and see how these principles are illustrated in the life of Abraham. We will not go into too much depth in chapter four, because we have all this fall to see these principles illustrated in detail through Abraham’s life in the book of Genesis. This sermon is like a bridge, bringing us back to Genesis and whetting our appetites to learn what it is to live a life of faith from Abraham, the father of faith.

Listen worshipfully to God’s holy Word. Worship does not end when singing stops. Worship takes place when we listen with joyful trembling to the God Who speaks. Let’s worship Him as we listen.

Romans 3:27-31 says:

*<sup>27</sup> Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. <sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, <sup>30</sup> since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. <sup>31</sup> Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.*

Paul, are you telling us that God has made a way where sinners who have faith in Jesus can be declared righteous? Through faith alone? Okay, Paul, what does that faith look like? How do I know if I am living under the influence of justifying faith? What will be the practical results of that in my life?

### **Justification by Faith Produces Humility**

Paul says, “Good questions. Here is the first practical result, or practical indication that you are living under the influence of justification by faith. First, justification by faith produces humility.”

C.S. Lewis said:

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free, which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else, and of which hardly any people except Christians ever imagine they are guilty of themselves. There is no fault that makes a man more unpopular and no fault that we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it in ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. The vice I am talking of is pride.

There is no sin that is more obnoxious to a holy and gracious God than the sin of pride. Paul is telling us that the first effect justification should have on our lives is that it should serve as a massive pride extinguisher. Verse 27 begins, “*Then what becomes of our boasting?*” In light of this glorious gospel that centers on the life of Jesus—of a God Who provides propitiation so that we can experience redemption and justification from our sins—what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. There is no room for boasting in the shadow of the cross.

Boasting is a term, an idea, which comes from the battlefield. It is what warriors would do when they faced a fierce enemy. They would go into the battle like the gladiators, roaring and shouting, “We are stronger than you! We are going to kill you!” in order to make themselves feel like they could defeat the enemy.

Tim Keller describes boasting like this:

What you boast in is what gives you confidence to go out and face the day. It is the thing of which you say, 'I am a somebody because I have that. I can beat what comes against me today, because I am this.' What you boast in is what fundamentally defines you. It is where you draw your identity and self-worth.

In light of the gospel, Paul says in Galatians 6:14, "May I never boast in anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Why? I am somebody, because I have the cross of Jesus. I can only beat what comes against me today because of what Christ has done on the cross for me. What defines me now is not what I have done, but what God has done for me in Jesus Christ. That is the only thing in my life of which I can boast. Everything else—all other boasting—is excluded.

Why is this so? Because of the second part of verses 27-28. Boasting is excluded by what kind of law? *"By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."* We are justified by coming empty-handed to Jesus with nothing to claim in ourselves. If righteousness could be achieved by our performance, obedience to the law or our religious rights and rituals, then we might have something to boast about. However, if righteousness comes only through what Jesus has done on the cross to rescue guilty sinners, then to boast would be like a man who is drowning, grasping in his fist a bunch of \$100 bills as the rest of his body goes under, saying, "I'm okay because I have money!" But you are going down. You cannot save yourself, Paul says. Only Jesus can do that. Therefore, you have nothing in which to boast.

How is this illustrated in the Old Testament? We see it in the life of Abraham. Let's look at Romans 4:1-3:

*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."*

Aren't you glad Paul asked what the Scripture says? That is the ultimate authority for Paul. "What does the Bible say?" He quotes Genesis 15:6, one of the most important verses from the Old Testament quoted in the letter of Romans.

That phrase, "counted to him," or, "reckoned to him," is an extremely important word in Paul's theology. We see it here in Romans 4 repeated in verses three, five, six, eight, nine, 10, 11, 22, 23 and 24. It is an accounting term, which means that God takes something we do not have

in ourselves and credits it to us. Abraham did not have righteousness in himself, but God, the Divine Accountant, said, “Here, I am going to give you a credit card of righteousness from the Bank of Heaven, and it has an unlimited credit limit. I am going to account, or credit, all the righteousness I have in heaven to you.”

Doug Moo, who wrote a commentary on the book of Romans, says this: “If we compare other verses in which the same grammatical construction is used as in Genesis 15:6, we arrive at this conclusion: the crediting of Abram’s faith as righteousness means ‘to account him a righteousness that does not inherently belong to him.’” The next verses are going to back that up.

God takes Abraham on a walk at night and says, “Abraham, look at these stars. Can you count them?” Abraham looks and is amazed at the vastness of the heavens. God says to him, “So shall your descendants be.” At that point, Abraham had no children, but he says, “God, if that is what You say, I will trust You. I will believe You.” And God says, “Okay, Abraham, I like that faith and trust in Me. I will take care of everything else.”

God accounts righteousness to Abraham. It is not like faith earns the righteousness. No, God sees a man who trusts Him and says, “Okay, I am going to give you what you do not have—what you could never earn, work for or deserve—simply because you trust me.”

Then, in verse four, Paul gives an illustration from everyday life to back this up, saying, “*Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.*” This doesn’t work quite as well for pastors. I find it amazing that we actually get paid to study the Word of God, preach, teach and shepherd God’s people. We don’t deserve that. So maybe when we get a paycheck we should write a “thank you” note to the church and say, “Thank you. We did not earn or deserve this.”

To the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift. It is what you are owed and what is due to you. I would guess that after you have worked a couple weeks and get a paycheck, most of you do not call up your boss and say, “I am so thankful that you keep paying me.” God does not have a “pay as you go” plan. God doesn’t say, “You work and I’ll pay you.” He says, “Righteousness is not for sale and I’m not putting it up for sale. You could not buy it if it was; I am not going to be anyone’s debtor. This is the only plan I have. It is the bail out plan. You are bankrupt; I bail you out; you say, ‘Thank You.’ It has nothing to do with what you have done. I will pay all your debts, but I won’t let you put me under obligation.”

That is God’s plan for justification. Verse five describes it so amazingly: “*And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...*” Saving faith starts here: “God, You don’t owe me anything. Everything I have is an undeserved gift.” What do we have that we did not receive? It is all undeserved. It is all free.

Notice that justifying faith is not merely saying, “Yeah, I have faith.” In our culture, when we say we have faith, it can mean, “I closed my eyes, wished really hard and believed that something was going to come true.” It can mean a person who is just naively optimistic. They are pretty stupid, but they have a lot of faith. That is not justifying faith. Faith itself cannot save you. In fact, it can kill you.

There were a lot of people who went to the shelves in Chicago drug stores in 1982 and bought what they thought was Tylenol. However, they swallowed what was really cyanide. They had faith in the label on the bottle, not knowing that a criminal had taken the capsules and filled them with cyanide. If you are trusting for salvation in anything other than what Jesus has done on the cross, you are swallowing theological cyanide. It is deadly. It will kill you.

Last year, on our daughter’s birthday, we were shocked to receive a call from her in Tennessee that one of her classmates had been shot and killed. Within a couple of days, it was revealed in the news that her fiancé had been charged with murdering her. Earlier this month, he pleaded guilty to the crime. He had confessed to one of his cellmates that she had no idea what was coming to her that evening. In fact, she was with one of her friends that very day, filling out save-the-date announcements for her wedding. She had faith in a man who was not worthy of her trust and confidence. She had faith in a man who betrayed her.

That is what a generic definition of faith will do to you. It will betray you. There is only one kind of faith that saves, and it is the faith that believes in a God Who justifies the ungodly by grace alone and through what Jesus has done on the cross. It is not even enough to believe God is holy. Many people have reverence for God, yet they seek to be their own savior and justifier, trusting in their own performance and religion. The very fact that God is holy causes them to tremble and work harder for their salvation. That is not the faith that saves.

It is not merely believing that God is loving that will save you. Many people say, “God is love. It is His duty to forgive sins.” No, saving faith is believing God when He says, “Here is what is true about you: you are ungodly, wicked and sinful. There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who seeks after Me, no one who does good.”

You have no hope in yourself and saving faith says, “Okay, I believe that is true of me.” Saving faith also says, “God, I believe this to be true of You: You justify the ungodly. I flee from myself and run to Jesus, clinging only to Him.” That is what coming to this communion table represents. It is abandoning all hope in yourself and fleeing to Jesus, trusting in Him and believing that God justifies ungodly sinners who do put their trust in Jesus. If you see yourself as pretty good, better than most, or a little sinner, then Christ is just a little savior to you, and that is not faith.

C.S. Lewis said:

Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good, above all that we are better than someone else, I think we may be sure that we are being acted on not by God, but by the devil, the deceiver. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether.

Saving faith produces humility. It excludes boasting. It causes us to say, “I will not boast in anything, no gifts or power or wisdom.” David says in the Psalms that this blessing of being justified by God through faith is available to everyone. Praise God for what we read in 4:6-8!

Paul turns away from Abraham for a moment and says, “You know what? It’s not just our forefather, Abraham, who was justified by faith alone. King David was also justified by faith alone.” What is Paul showing us here? He is saying there has only ever been one way to be accounted righteous before God. It is the same way in the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament. It is the same for those who are the most godly models of our faith, and it is the same for the most sinful. There is only one way for everyone, and Abraham and David both agreed it is by faith.

Verse six says that *“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.’”* That is the great exchange of justification. It is not your good works being credited to you. It is your sin not being credited to you and Christ’s good works being accounted to you as your righteousness. That is justification. It is blessed, sweet and glorious beyond description to know that you are justified by God. It has a sweet influence over your life that causes you to pour contempt on all your pride and say, “I will not boast in anything—no gifts, no power, no wisdom. But I will boast in Jesus Christ.”

This quote was written in the first century in an old, ancient letter, The Epistle to Diognetus. It shows the sweetness of what it means to be justified. Listen to this:

When our unrighteousness was fulfilled and it had been made perfectly clear that its wages—punishment and death—were to be expected, then the season arrived during which God had decided to reveal at last His goodness and power. Oh, the surpassing kindness and love of God! He did not hate us or reject us or bear a grudge against us. Instead, He was patient and forbearing. In His mercy, He took upon Himself our sins. He Himself gave up His own Son as a ransom for us—the Holy One for the lawless; the Guiltless for the guilty; the Just for the unjust; the Incorruptible for

the corruptible; the Immortal for the mortal. For what else but His righteousness could have covered our sins? In Whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified except in the Son of God alone? And this is what every believer says: “Oh, the sweet exchange! Oh, the incomprehensible work of God! Oh, the unexpected blessings!” That the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one Righteous Person, while the righteousness of One should justify many sinners.

When you come to this communion table, you are saying, “Oh, the sweet exchange! Oh, the incomprehensible work of God! Oh, the unexpected blessings!” Isn’t that beautiful? Isn’t that sweet? Isn’t it blessed to know the lawless deeds are forgiven, your sins are covered and the Lord will not count your sin against you?

You can know that today—right now—through faith in Jesus, and when you do, you will grow in humility and hate your pride. Be careful. Even as you grow in humility, the devil will whisper in your ear, “Oh, aren’t you being humble now? Look at you! Aren’t you proud of yourself for being so humble?” Be gone!

### **Justification by Faith Builds Unity in God’s Family**

Look at Romans 3:29. After he says, “*For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law,*” he says in verse 29, “*Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also...*” The dividing wall has been broken down between those who had the law and those who did not, between Jews and Gentiles. Why is this so? Because He is the God of all and because of the *Shema*: “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one*” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Because He is one, verse 30 says there is only one way of access to Him, and that is the same way for everyone. He will circumcise the circumcised (the Jews) by faith, as well as the uncircumcised (all the other nations) through faith.

Grace brings us together in one family. Everyone has access to Him in the same way. Grace brings us together; pride tears us apart. I propose that wherever we have divisions and divisiveness in a church, at the root of it is pride. At the root of it is people asserting and acting as if that they are superior to others. However, God says, “I will justify both Jew and Gentile, Muslim and Hindu, Buddhist and Baptist, Presbyterian and Catholic, Bible Church people and Atheists in only one way—through faith in Jesus and what He has done on the cross.” The ground is leveled at the foot of the cross. We are one family.

How do we see this illustrated in Scripture? We see it in the life of Abraham. Look at 4:9:

*Is this blessing [of justification] 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.*

When we go through the life of Abraham, we are going to see That in Genesis 15, Abraham was accounted righteous through his faith. When was he circumcised? Genesis 17. Therefore, who was Abraham when he was declared righteous before God? He was not a Jew. He was a Gentile from a pagan background. Father Abraham started out as a Gentile who was justified by faith and before he was circumcised.

Paul is saying this is an example to us. The right of circumcision was a sign—a “*seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised*” (4:11). What is the purpose of Paul doing all this? We don’t care much about circumcision today. We don’t even like to talk about it much. It is kind of awkward to be talking about circumcision.

I was running the other day, and my earbuds had broken. I kept listening to a sermon and they kept using the word circumcision over and over again. As I ran past a woman I wanted to cover the sound source so she couldn’t hear that word. “Who is this weirdo running past me?”

The point is that it was not a ritual that made Abraham righteous. It was his faith. Or, to be more precise, it was God graciously giving him righteousness through his faith.

Paul continues in verse 11:

*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.*

So God is forming one family here, and it consists of people from every nation who have faith in what God will do for sinners. He will justify the ungodly purely through grace.

What does this do? It brings us together. It makes us a welcoming community. It is not saying, “Look at me! Look how much I know about the Bible. Look how religious and moral I am. Surely, I am better than that person who just walked in off the streets. Surely, I am better than homosexuals.” Oh, no! People who are justified by grace through faith in Jesus do not look down on others. They do not think themselves better. They know, “It is only by the grace of God that I, the chief of sinners, have been counted righteous in God’s sight.” Justification by faith builds unity in God’s family.

A Jew may have been listening to Paul and outraged by what he said. “That’s not right, Paul. Are you telling us we are not special? Okay, we will grant that Gentiles may become part of

us, but they must come under the law of Moses to be part of our community.” Look at what Paul says about that in 4:13: *“For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”* In fact, the law did not come until 430 years after Abraham. Verse 14 continues, *“For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.”*

If it is our performance that makes us the heirs of God’s promises, then faith means nothing and the promises are worthless because they can never be achieved. What is the point of the law? Verse 15 says, *“For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.”* He is using a technical term—an aspect of law is transgression. It is crossing a defined boundary. The law defined the boundaries. When the law came, it resulted in transgression being revealed. The Jews who had the law and Christian people who have the Bible are more accountable to God, because we have seen more of His revelation. What do we see when we look at His law in His Word? We see that we are sinners deserving of His wrath. The law is never there to give us a way to become righteous.

What is the effect of all this? It draws us together in a community with gratitude, humility, meekness, rest, happiness, laughter and welcome. It also thrusts us out in mission, because we want to make this gospel of salvation by grace through faith known to all the peoples of the earth. We want to become one united family, saying, “Worthy is the Lamb Who was slain!”

Abraham had a credit card of righteousness drawn from the Bank of Heaven with an unlimited credit limit. What is the pin code for that credit card? Faith. F-A-I-T-H. That same credit card with that same pin code is available to all people. So we are united.

The elders read a book by Ray Ortlund on the gospel in which he said, “Gospel doctrine without gospel culture equals hypocrisy. Gospel culture without gospel doctrine equals fragility. Gospel doctrine plus gospel culture equals power.” That is what we are aiming for here: one family united by grace through faith in Christ.

### **Justification by Faith Produces a Life that is Growing in Godliness**

Romans 3:31 says, *“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”* A moralist is listening to all this and getting worried, saying, “Paul, if this is true and people can be righteous by faith, what is the point of being good?” Justification is not about a change in character; it is about a change in legal status. God does not justify you because you are getting better; He justifies you because you are ungodly and you trust in Him. Paul makes it clear in verse 31 that the faith by which we are justified is a faith that will

persevere and grow in godliness, resulting in a life of trust and obedience. This kind of life will uphold the law of God.

Look at verse 31 again: *“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”* As Christopher Ash says, “When we bow the knee to Christ, we do what the law always wanted us to do. It pointed us in this direction—to bow the knee to Christ. Paul is saying, “Those who trust in Christ will uphold the law.” You don’t need to be nervous about the influence of the gospel or worried that if we concentrate too much on God’s free grace in Christ, people are going to go out and live however they please. To the contrary, when you realize that God loves you and accepts you freely, solely on the basis of what Jesus has done, it makes you want to know Him better, live for Him and obey Him.

Do we have an Old Testament example of this? Yes, Abraham. Let’s read the effect that Abraham’s faith had on his life, and we will have all fall to expand upon this.

*That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations.”*

Now, Paul is going to give us a little glimpse into the contours of Abraham’s faith. How did this faith change Abraham’s life? It is a beautiful, attractive and exemplary picture for us of what a life of faith looks like.

Verse 17 continues:

*... In the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb.*

No, Abraham believed that God gives life to the dead. He believed that God calls into existence things that don’t exist. “I’m 100; she’s 90. God, You’re going to have to fix this. You’re going to have to take care of this. And You can.” We know that there were ups and downs, but the overall thrust of his life is described in verse 20.

Friends, there are few verses in the Bible that I have prayed more for myself in the last 15 years than Romans 4:20-21, asking God to make this increasingly true of me. The text says, “No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he

*gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was 'counted to him as righteousness.'"*

Abraham's faith was a living faith. It was a persevering faith. It was a faith that trusted in God and caused him to know in Whom he believes. He was persuaded that God was able to do what He had promised. In faith, Abraham continued to cleave to this God Who had made great promises. That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness.

However, Paul wants us to know this: *"But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."*

Lord, we believe that You will justify ungodly sinners who trust in what You have done through Jesus on the cross for us. We believe that You raised Him from the dead, so that we could be accounted righteous by His death and resurrection. We will not boast in anything, save in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. If that is the substance of your faith, come and feast on the riches that Christ has provided for you.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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