

Unearned

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Unashamed - A Study of Romans / Romans 4:1–8

God does not justify us as payment for what we have accomplished; He credits righteousness to the ungodly who trust Him. Like Abraham and David, we discover the blessed freedom of receiving by faith what we could never earn through works.

Introduction - Image of Paris

- Paris, early 1800s.
 - Jean Valjean has just been released after nineteen years — nineteen years for stealing bread, and for trying to escape a system that never let him go.
 - No one will hire him.
 - No one will feed him.
 - No one will let him sleep under their roof.
 - Except one man. A bishop. Monsignor Myriel.
 - The bishop takes him in — a stranger, an ex-convict, a man the whole town has already judged.
 - He feeds him. He gives him a bed. He treats him like a guest, not a threat.
 - And in the middle of the night, Valjean gets up — and steals the bishop's silver.
 - The silverware. The plates. Everything of value in the house.
 - He runs. He's caught within hours. The police drag him back to the bishop's door — silver in hand, guilt written all over him.
 - This is the moment.

- Because everyone in that room expects the same thing to happen next.
- The bishop will identify his silver.
- The police will haul Valjean away.
- Justice will be served. The books will be balanced.
- That's how it's supposed to work. That's how it always works.
 - You take what isn't yours — you pay for it.
 - But the bishop looks at Valjean. Looks at the police.
 - And then he says:
 - "This silver was a gift. I gave it to him."
 - Then he turns, walks back into the house — and comes back with the candlesticks. The ones Valjean didn't even think to steal.
 - "You forgot these," he says. And hands them over.
 - No lecture. No probation. No "don't let this happen again."
 - Just — silver, given, to a man who had shown himself to be a thief.
- That's not how it's supposed to work.
 - That's not how *anything* is supposed to work.
 - We live in a world of wages. Of earning.
 - Of getting what we deserve — and we mostly accept that, because most of the time, we assume we come out ahead.
 - But every one of us has a version of that night.
 - A moment we took what wasn't ours.
 - A moment we deserved the police at the door, not a gift in our hands.
 - Paul is about to tell us about this incredible grace that overrides what's owed.

- And here's the deal - it isn't just a beautiful moment in a musical.
- It's the foundation of how a person gets right with God.
- Or, another word that gets used a lot — how we are justified.
 - In Romans, justification is God's courtroom declaration that a sinner is righteous in his sight.
 - It does not mean we have lived a righteous life or suddenly become morally perfect; it means God gives us a right standing we could never earn.
 - He can do this justly because Jesus bore our sin in his death and was raised for our justification.
 - We receive that verdict through faith—not as a reward for our work, but as a gift of grace.
- And in chapter 4, we're going to be looking at a case study for how justification actually takes place.
 - It goes all the way back to a very significant friendship between God and a man named Abraham.
 - Stand with me in honor of the reading of God's Word.

Scripture Reading

Romans 4:1–8 ESV

¹ 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,

⁶ 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.

- Paul doesn't waste a word getting there.
 - “What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?”
 - He picks the one name every reader would reach for first - Father Abraham.
- Before we get into this text, I think it is a good place to remember that salvation in the Old Testament worked the same way as it does for us.
 - Abraham was justified by the righteousness of Christ.
 - The only difference is that Abraham’s faith looked forward, our’s looks back.
 - But salvation was still secured by the person and work of Jesus Christ.
 - I love how Hebrews describes Abraham’s forward-looking faith:

Hebrews 11:10 ESV

¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

- I do have to say, I can't read about Abraham and not think about the old kids' song.
 - Years ago we had a missions partnership in Jamaica, and we were often invited into the local elementary schools.

- Public schools — but they didn't mind.
- The teachers were overworked and happy to hand the room to someone else for a while.
- Those kids could not get enough of that old song with the goofy motions - Father Abraham.
- If you were losing them, if nothing else was landing, you dropped in Father Abraham and you had the whole room back.
- But Abraham is more than fodder for a kids' song.
 - More than a character in an Old Testament story.
 - Christians, Jews, and Muslims all trace their faith back to this one man.
 - If anyone in Scripture has earned the right to boast, surely it's him.
 - But watch what Paul does with that question.
 - He's about to take the one man everyone assumed had grounds to boast, and open his hands to show there's nothing in them.

An Unearned Reputation — [Romans 4:1-2](#)

- Abraham was an incredible man of action.
 - God told him to move.
 - He left his ancestral home for a nice piece of real estate a few hundred miles to the west.
 - He wasn't looking for better schools or moving for work.
 - He was moving, sight-unseen because God told him to.
 - I would have had some questions - but he believed what God said and he went.
 - Put a contract on the house and never even met the neighbors.

- God told him he would have a son, even though the calendar wasn't on his side.
 - His wife's advanced age put child-bearing out of reach.
 - But still Abraham believed God and trusted that God was going to keep his word.
- And later, God would test the mettle of Abraham's faith by demanding that the child God had given him be offered as a sacrifice.
 - Abraham was willing to go through with the plan because, as [Hebrews 11](#) states, he believed God could raise the dead if he needed to.
- Of course, Abraham was far from perfect — He was prone to putting God's promises in jeopardy from time to time.
 - Despite those failures, there's still no denying that Abraham had remarkable faith.
 - The promises he was holding on to wouldn't even be fulfilled in his lifetime.
- Abraham received the remarkable designation "Friend of God."
 - That has to earn some credit - right?
 - I love how The Message handles vv. 1-2.

Romans 4:1–2 MSG

¹ So how do we fit what we know of Abraham, our first father in the faith, into this new way of looking at things?

² If Abraham, by what he *did* for God, got God to approve him, he could certainly have taken credit for it. But the story we're given is a God-story, not an Abraham-story.

- Paul isn't saying Abraham didn't do anything.
 - He left Ur.
 - He offered his son.

- He believed against every calendar and every biological reality stacked against him.
- Those are real actions with real consequences.
- If I were put into those scenarios, I can assure you that there would be some sleepless nights, wrestling through the implications of obedience.
- Paul isn't denying that Abraham did remarkable things.
 - Instead, he is asking whether those faithful actions put God in Abraham's debt.
 - Did Abraham's obedience become the price of his acceptance?
 - Did his faithfulness look so impressive that God was obligated to declare him righteous?
 - Paul's answer is NO and spells it out very clearly in v. 2.
- "If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about — but not before God."
 - Read that carefully.
 - Paul doesn't say Abraham has *nothing* to boast about.
 - He is basically saying Abraham might have plenty to boast about — to his neighbors, to his family, to anyone impressed by a such things.
 - Just not to God.
- Before people, "Friend of God" is a title that could open every door in town.
 - You better believe that's a title that belongs on a business card or a name tag.
 - That's a title MADE for the "humble brag" or the "dinner party flex."
 - "Oh, did I tell you what God told me the other day? Out of the blue, he just said, 'Hello friend!'"

- Paul's point is this - before God, it doesn't even get you in the room — because in God's economy, Friend of God wasn't a title that was ever earned in the first place.
- He asks what Abraham gained — and the answer isn't "I gained it by working for it."
- The Message got that right: This isn't Abraham's story, it's God's
- And the temptation to turn a God-story into a story about us did not end with Abraham.
- We can take good things God has done in our lives and quietly begin treating them as reasons we deserve to belong to him.
- So ask yourself: when you think about why you belong to God, what part of your own story rises to the surface first?
- Some of us have a "Friend of God" line of our own.
 - You might be the person who:
 - Grew up in church.
 - Never really strayed.
 - Deacon Body.
 - Sunday school teacher.
 - Forty years of faithful attendance.
 - None of that is bad. Abraham's faith wasn't bad either.
- But watch what you reach for when someone asks how you're doing spiritually, or when you're lying awake wondering if you're right with God.
 - If the answer starts with your track record instead of Christ, you've quietly slipped into a you-story instead of a God-story.
 - Your pedigree can open doors with people.

- It doesn't get you in the room with God — because that was never how the room worked.
- Abraham may have the reputation as the Father of our Faith.
 - But the reputation that mattered most—righteous before God—was one he could never earn.
 - But here's the question -
- If reputation doesn't earn you anything before God, what does?
 - Paul doesn't leave you guessing.
 - He moves straight from reputation to something even more basic: payment.
- Because if reputation is what people give you for who you appear to be, wages are what people owe you for what you've actually done.
 - And most of us live by wages, whether we call it that or not.
 - You put in the hours, you expect the check.
 - You do the job, you expect the credit.
 - That's not greed. That's just how fairness works everywhere else in life.
- So Paul asks the obvious next question: is that how it works with God, too?
 - Not really - as we will see, our “paycheck” isn’t earned, which means it really isn’t a paycheck at all.

An Unearned Paycheck — [Romans 4:3–5](#)

- In order to begin, Paul quotes [Genesis 15:6](#).
 - God had promised Abraham descendants even though Abraham had no son and no natural reason to expect one.
 - In spite of those obstacles, Abraham trusted God’s promise.

- In that moment, Abraham did not accomplish something for God.
- We're told that all he did was trust what God promised to accomplish.
- And in that moment, God "counted" or "credited" righteousness to Abraham.
- The accounting word credited becomes central.
 - God credited Abraham with a righteousness he had no hand in producing
 - This does not mean Abraham's faith was such an impressive virtue that God rewarded it with righteousness.
 - That would turn faith into another work.
 - Faith receives its value from its object: Abraham trusted God and his promise.
- But it is important to know, Abraham was counted as righteous before many of his spiritual accomplishments.
 - Before the covenant of circumcision.
 - Before Isaac was born
 - Before most of his significant demonstrations of faith.
 - God didn't wait until Abraham had racked up a lifetime of proof and then declare him righteous.
 - God credited righteousness to Abraham when Abraham believed God's promise.
- But that idea is something we're not really used to.
- To prove his point, Paul turns to something that everybody understands - a paycheck
 - We all instinctively understand how a paycheck works.
 - We put in the hours and we are compensated for our time.

- In a very real sense, our wages are owed as a debt and our employer clears that debt on some kind of regular basis that we affectionately call payday!
- You earned whatever compensation you received.
- And when you get a raise, a ton of overtime, or some other boost to your paycheck, you can absolutely boast about that accomplishment.
- This is what Paul is saying in v. 4 — to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as something that has been earned.
 - But salvation isn't payment for a job well done.
 - We aren't saved because we've worked hard enough.
 - Salvation is not compensation God owes us for services rendered..
- What an obnoxious place to be - to claim that God somehow owes us something.
 - The reality is that we are the ones with a debt.
 - And no amount of labor is going to settle that debt.
- Fortunately, we do have an alternative — this beautiful thing called grace.
 - V. 5 is the pivot point for us.
 - To the one who does not work.
 - That's not talking about a lazy person who never lifts a finger for the kingdom.
 - It's talking about the person who recognizes that he cannot be justified by his work.
- In order to be justified, one must believe in the justifier.
 - Jesus said it just as plainly in the passage we all know so well...

John 3:16 **ESV**

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

- Not, whoever works hard for him.
 - Not, whoever tells everyone about him.
 - Not, whoever is baptized in his name.
 - Not, whoever gives, serves, loves, blesses in his name.
 - Not, whoever joins the right church in his name
 - Believes — or as we might say it in our current context:
 - Whoever has faith in Jesus.
 - That’s not to say that those are unimportant responsibilities.
 - But we must recognize that there’s not a single good work you can do in the church today that will justify you.
 - There are all kinds of things that you can do out of gratitude and in response to God’s saving work — but none can provoke God’s saving work.
- And let us not forget that we all share a common problem, which is why we need to be justified to begin with.
 - We are ungodly.
 - Paul made that very clear to us back in [Rom. 3:10-12](#)

Romans 3:10–12 ESV

¹⁰ as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

- If we were godly — we wouldn’t need justified.

- Sadly, we all fall into the same boat of ungodliness which is why we so desperately need that righteousness that we couldn't possibly earn.
- Which means some of you need to stop checking your hours.
 - Some of you are still clocking in.
 - Not at church, necessarily — in your own head.
 - Tracking the quiet time you missed.
 - The Bible reading plan you fell behind on.
 - The way you snapped at your spouse this morning and haven't made it right yet.
 - And somewhere underneath all that tracking is a quiet math problem: *Am I doing enough to be okay with God today?*
 - That's wage thinking.
 - That's clocking in and clocking out and hoping the hours add up.
- But [Romans 3](#) already told you the hours don't add up.
 - Not even close. Not for you, not for Abraham, not for anyone in this room.
 - You were never on the clock.
 - Righteousness was credited the moment you believed, not the moment you'd earned enough to deserve it.
- If you're still checking your hours, you've missed the point.
 - This was never a paycheck.
 - It was a gift.
- But an unearned paycheck only addresses one side of our problem.
 - Abraham shows us that even remarkable faithfulness cannot put God in our debt.

- David shows us something darker: we have not merely failed to earn righteousness; we have actively sinned against God.
- So Paul moves from a man remembered for his faith to a man haunted by his failure.
 - He turns to David.

An Unearned Pardon — [Romans 4:6–8](#)

- This time, Paul turns to [Psalm 32](#).
 - The Psalm doesn't identify the specific occasion — other than it was penned by David.
 - We know [Psalm 51](#) was written after David's conspiracy with Bathsheba...perhaps [Psalm 32](#) came from the same occasion.
 - David had a title like Abraham.
 - As Abraham was a Friend of God, David was a man after God's own heart.
 - But just like Abraham, David was a flawed leader.
 - The power of sin captured David's heart just as it captures our hearts.
 - But in spite of his sin, David shared another thing in common with Abraham - he was justified by faith.
- And just like Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness, the same could be said for David.
 - But David came to realize something significant about this “credited righteousness.”
 - That is what he wrote in [Psalm 32](#) and what Paul draws on to make his point.
 - This credited righteousness has tremendous consequences in God's spiritual accounting.

- I'm going to tell you one of the most terrifying things I could possibly tell you this morning.
 - God knows everything about everything.
 - We have no issue acknowledging that in abstract.
 - God's omniscience isn't up for debate.
 - But let the significance of that sink in.
 - God knows *EVERYTHING about EVERYTHING*.
 - This means that God knows every single one of our sins.
 - Make a list - I dare you - you'll forget something.
 - God knows them all.
 - Every sinful word - known.
 - Every sinful act - known.
 - Every time you did the right thing for the wrong reason - even your motives aren't hidden from God.
 - Every cross word, every stray glance, every whispered threat.
 - If you believe there is a God in heaven, the realization that you are FULLY known by him should leave you absolutely mortified.
 - You could put together an inexhaustible list of violations of God's standards.
 - You could spend the rest of your life trying to outrun the list. You will never get to the bottom of it.
 - The awful thing about our sinful condition is that even our best efforts miss the mark.
 - All you will ever do is continue to store up wrath for yourself (which is exactly what Paul said back in [Rom. 2:5](#)).
 - But here is the good news from the pen of King David.

Romans 4:7–8 ESV

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.”

- You see, something incredible happens when we are justified.
 - All of that sin that we have collected is forgiven.
 - All of that debt that we have collected — God doesn't pretend it wasn't real.
 - He settles it. But he doesn't settle it with us.
 - He settled it at the cross, with Jesus's blood, and then he does something even more staggering: he refuses to charge it to our account.
 - Paid for by Christ. Never counted against you
 - And when God looks at us, he doesn't see us in the filthy rags of our own efforts at righteousness...instead he sees us covered in the perfect righteousness of Jesus.
- You could spend the rest of your lives making that list of failures - but because of the finished work of Jesus and your faith in the Gospel - that list is always covered under the righteousness of Jesus.
- “blessed is the man against whom the LORD will not count his sin.”
- Remember the bishop's house in Les Mis?
 - Remember Valjean — silver in his hands, guilt written all over him, waiting for the only verdict that made sense.
 - He knew exactly what came next.
 - Everyone in that room did.
 - But the bishop looked past the verdict everyone expected and gave him something else entirely.

- That's the feeling [Psalm 32](#) is describing.
- That's what David couldn't get over.
- You must remember, however, that you do not earn the blessings of which David spoke and Paul now quotes.
 - Those are blessings obtained by faith and given by the grace of God.
 - But what exactly does this faith look like?
 - How do you know if you have the kind of faith that Paul is talking about here?

Invitation - The Three Legs of Saving Faith

- I've been pointing you to the importance of faith this morning.
 - But what exactly does that even mean?
 - We know that it isn't a work that we do.
 - Salvation isn't secured by more faith, stronger faith.
 - We don't get a greater pardon from sin by "faithing" harder.
- There are three elements of saving faith.
- First - the facts.
 - Saving faith is not abstract.
 - Saving faith is particularly concerned with the Gospel.
 - Whenever we share the Gospel, we want to include certain key data points.
 - God is perfect and holy.
 - Humanity rebelled against God and continues to do so - every single human being comes up short of God's standard.
 - God loves us so much he sent his son, Jesus, to pay the penalty for sin by dying on the cross.

- Jesus was resurrected from the dead and will return one day to judge the wicked and usher in his Kingdom.
- Secondly - assent.
 - We have to acknowledge the truth of the data.
 - We saw the new Spider Man movie last night.
 - I know some data about Spider Man, but I don't believe in Spider Man.
 - Lots of people hear the Gospel but don't believe it.
 - In order to be justified, we have to acknowledge the truth of the Gospel.
 - But that's still not enough.

James 2:19 ESV

¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

- Recognizing the truth of the Gospel does qualify you to be a demon, but it doesn't actually save you.
- You lack one more thing.
- Finally, saving faith requires personal trust in Jesus.
 - You have to know the facts about the Gospel.
 - You have to believe the facts about the Gospel.
 - And then you have to put your trust in Christ alone to save you.
 - But even in that, faith is not a work that we do.
- But it is something that demands a response
- Stop waiting until you feel ready, or worthy, or like you've finally got your life together enough to come.
 - There is nothing left to prove.

- Nothing left to fix first.
- Nothing left to do before you trust in Jesus.
- Just open hands.
- That's all faith has ever asked of you — not your effort, not your record, not your best attempt at being enough.
- Just you, coming as you are, trusting that Christ has already done what you could never do for yourself.
- If you're here this morning and you know your life doesn't add up — the things you've done, the person you know you actually are underneath what everyone sees — stop pretending you can fix that on your own.
- Stop trying to be good enough long enough to earn your way back to God.
- Bring it to Jesus, exactly as it is.
- Believe what he's already done.
- Receive what he's already offered.
- But understand this...
 - Coming as you are doesn't mean staying as you are.
 - David didn't just receive forgiveness — he stopped hiding first.
 - He said in [Ps. 32:5](#) "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity... and you forgave the iniquity of my sin."
 - He said the true thing about himself before God said the true thing about his mercy.
- That's not a condition on the gift.
- It's not one more item to check off before you qualify.

- It's just what receiving it actually looks like — agreeing with God about what's real, instead of managing how you look while you reach for God's gift.
- So if you're here this morning and you already know what you've been carrying — stop managing it.
 - Name it. Confess it.
 - Turn from it. Then open your hands and receive God's grace.