Justified by Grace, Through Faith
Romans 4:1-12

Last Sunday, Su and I were talking with someone who told us that a younger family member wants to come study at the EPFL. The problem is, apparently, that the entrance requirements for foreign students have gone up. So if she doesn't make the grade she doesn't get in.

Now, the EPFL is good, but it's not heaven, is it? In fact, some of its architecture looks more like The Other Place. But if EPFL is hard to get into what about heaven? If someone were to ask you, 'how good do you have to be to get into heaven?' what would you say?

Because even if you're not yet a Christian, if there is a heaven, you almost certainly have some view of who should or should not get in, don't you? So who would merit being saved if there was such a thing as salvation? What test would they have to pass?

And Paul's letter to the Romans deals with exactly that issue - except here he uses different terminology. Look at v2-3: '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."'

So to be *justified* is to be counted righteous. It's to have God look at you and say, 'you are right with me. I find nothing wrong in you. You make the grade. You pass the test. You can come in.'

So what do you have to do to get that verdict on your life? Because whether or not you realise it, it's a verdict we all want.

A Need to be Right
Look at v1: 'What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?'

And Paul's engaging with Jewish people for whom Abraham was *the* father-figure. Today, we could widen the circle, couldn't we? Because people talk of the three great Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. So how would Judaism and Islam answer that question 'how can you get that verdict on your life? How can you be right with God?

Well, here's how one Jewish writing from the second century BC puts it: 'Abraham was perfect in all his dealings with the Lord and gained favour *by his righteousness* throughout his life.' (Book of Jubilees). How did Abraham win favour with God? By his righteousness, the rabbis answered. By being perfect in his dealings with God throughout his life.

In other words, he was declared righteous because he was righteous.

So, what grade do you have to get to be admitted? You've got to be perfect. Or at least try to be righteous. And God will declare you right.

Ok, what about Islam? Well, there are the five pillars, the five things you have to do. Firstly, believe that there is only one God - and in his prophets - one of whom was Abraham - but the final of whom was Mohammed. Then, pray. Then, give to those in need, fast during Ramadan, and if possible visit Mecca and do the Hajj. And over all those, try to live a righteous life, by avoiding big sins and by doing good to others.

But listen, you don't have to be Jewish or Muslim to think like that do you? That to be declared right with God depends on us doing the right. And avoiding the wrong. That's the kind of person God accepts.

But of course, if you're here and you're not particularly religious, you might hear that and say, 'yup, and that's the problem with religion, you guys tie yourselves up in knots, trying to please a god who isn't even there.'

Except, you don't escape, do you? Because when *you* do something you know is wrong, and you feel guilty about it, you try and atone for that thing, don't you? You don't use those words, but you try and do something that helps you feel right again. We all do.

Maybe you beat yourself up. Sure, you look at those religious fanatics who literally whip themselves, and think they're crazy. But when you know you've done something wrong, don't you sometimes do that to yourself on the inside?

Or maybe you don;t. Maybe you try and do some good to cover up, or pay off the bad. Like if you're married and you have a big bust up with your spouse, or yell at the kids, or kick the dog. To start with, you try to justify yourself, don't you. You tell yourself you were right, and they're wrong. Why? Because you have this need to be in the right, to be declared right.

But as the minutes tick past, you might begin to feel 'well, maybe I was a bit out of line', so what do you do then? You determine to be nice and kind to others. Why? Because you're trying to prove you're not this bad person that your behaviour says you are. You're trying to prove you're ok, that you make the grade.

Or think of your touchiness when someone criticises you. Why do you defend yourself? Or why does comparing yourself to others either make you feel good if you compare down, or lousy if you compare up? Because we have this need to feel like we are passing the test, whatever that test is.

It's why if you post a selfie, you're not just posting a selfie, you're looking for likes - for someone to say 'hey, looking good.'

Or think, why has Jordan Peterson shifted so many copies of his book, called, *12 Rules for Life*? And then follows it up with *Beyond Order* - subtitled *'another 12 rules for life'*? Because we want someone to tell us, 'this is what you have to do to be right. Follow these rules and you will get the verdict, 'you are ok.'' Well, Peterson says, here are 12 rules to do just that; and if they don't do it, here's another 12.

Or think of cancel culture, or even just criticising other people, like I've just done with Jordan Peterson. Why do we do it? Because, at least in part, we feel better by having other people look worse. We can feel that we are right if other people are wrong.

So you don't have to be religious at all. We all have this need to be and feel right.

But think you have to try and *deserve* that verdict on your life, comes at a cost, doesn't it? Because either you'll be fragile in the face of criticism, because criticism undermines the story that you are good enough; or you'll live with a lurking sense of insecurity because you're never sure you've done enough. Or you'll become proud and self-righteous because you think, compared to others, you have done enough. And since when have fragility, insecurity, and self-righteousness been things you want for life?

So we all feel this need to be declared right. The question is - how do you get it and not be left proud or broken in the process?

A Gift not a Wage

Because what if you *don't* have to work for that verdict? What if, as opposed to every other religion, Christianity said, you can be the most *immoral* person in the world, or the most *moral* person in the world, but both be equally lost and alienated from God? But at the same time, being put right with God, regardless of your morality, is a gift of God to you?

Because that's the case Paul's been making in chapter 3. That in the gospel of Christ, the righteousness of God has been revealed, v22, 'The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe' - that the way to be counted right with God is through trusting Christ. And v24, to be 'justified by his grace as a gift.'

But if you were Jewish, you'd hear that and go, 'where do you get that from?! Because we all know, Abraham earned favour with God *by* his righteousness.'

Well… let's look at Abraham then, Paul says. Because, v2, 'If Abraham *was* justified by works [if he really was declared righteous by doing right], he has something to boast about, *but not before God.*' Because, v3, 'what does the Scripture say? "Abraham *believed* God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

Martin Luther, the great reformer, led the way in rediscovering the gospel of God's grace, which had been buried under years of teaching that you had to work and pay your way into a right standing with God. And as a result, his colleague Philip Melanchthon wrote the Augsburg Confession, to set out the key teaching of the Reformation. The problem is, the Roman Catholic authorities didn't appreciate it, so wrote their own response.

In response to which Melanchthon wrote what's called the Apology for the Augsburg confession. Not because he was apologising for it, but because he was defending it. And in it Melanchthon repeatedly says, 'we are amazed that you disagree with us, because all we're doing is stating what the Bible says' and stuff like 'you disagree with us on that?? But that's just what the church fathers always taught.'

His point was that justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, was not some new fangled invention.

And Paul would say, absolutely, but you can go even further back than the church fathers. Go back to *the* father, Abraham. And he quotes Genesis 15:6 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.' So, Abraham wasn't declared righteous because he was righteous, Paul says, he was declared righteous because he trusted God.' And that trusting God 'was counted to him' as righteousness.

And 'counted to him' is in the passive tense. So this isn't something Abraham did - like faith is a work that earns you something. This is something God did for him.

Because to have something counted, or credited to you, is an accounting term isn't it? It's why Paul says, v4: 'Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted *as a gift* but as his due.'

I mean, imagine I paid some money into your bank account. That money is credited to your account. But why would I do that? Either because I owe you, because you've done something for me, and I need to pay you for your work, or because I am feeling exceptionally generous and give you a gift.

Like on my girls' birthdays. Because every time they have a birthday, my mother phones me up and says, 'Hello darling, I've transferred some money to your account for their birthday.' Does she do that because the birthday girl nipped across to England and mowed her lawn for her? No. It's a gift.'

But your pay check is not a gift, is it? When your pay is credited to your account, if your employer said to you, 'this is my little gift to you, to make your day special' would you go, 'oh you are so kind, thank you, I do not deserve that'? No! You'd go, 'Gift?! Gift?! That's not a gift, that's my due buddy! You are only giving me what you owe me!'

And God owes us absolutely nothing, Paul says. And yet as we put our trust in him, he credits righteousness to our account, just like he did to Abraham. And he could list everything there was to hold against Abraham, but instead he counts him as righteous, and says, 'I have nothing against you.'

Verse 5: 'And to the one *who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly*, his faith is counted as righteousness.'

So who does God justify? Is it the godly? Is it those who have cleaned up their lives, and kept the rules, and obeyed the commandments? Is it the righteous he declares righteous? No. God justifies the ungodly. God declares right with him those who are not right.

Every other religion says, you've got to prove you are good enough for God, by your works. But then justification would be a wage not a gift. Instead, the gospel says it's precisely 'the one who *does not work but believes*', the one who is *not* trying to construct their own righteousness, who's not even putting their trust in their level of faith, but is trusting in Christ, that's the one God declares righteous, as his unearned, undeserved gift.

But if that was true for Abraham, their great father, what about David, their greatest king? Verse 6, 'Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works.' And he quotes Psalm 32, "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."

And David knew all about sin, didn't he. Was he a great leader? Absolutely. But he was also a brazen adulterer, and a man willing to see one of his own men exposed on the front line of battle and killed so that he, David, might have his sin covered.

Was David blessed because he was righteous? Because he finally got his sexual desires under control? No. He was blessed because his sin was forgiven and covered and not counted against him.

And Paul is saying, and we are blessed when, like David, God does not count our sins against us, but instead counts his righteousness to us.

So, justification by grace, through faith, is not something I've invented, Paul is saying, your two greatest heroes, Abraham and David bear witness to it.

‘Ah yes’ you might go, if you were Jewish, ‘but they’re still Jewish. And God’s favour is only for his special people.’

Offered to All
Verse 9: ‘Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?’

Because surely, the whole point of circumcision was that it marked out the Jewish people as the people of God’s special favour. Well, Paul says, v9-10, ‘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?’

Because if it was *after* then, sure, you could make a case that God counted Abraham righteous because he’d obeyed the law and got circumcised.

So which one was it? Verse 10, ‘It was not *after*, but *before* he was circumcised.’ In fact, given that God declared him righteous in Genesis 15 and he didn’t get circumcised until Genesis 17, it was probably at least 14 years before.

So circumcision didn’t earn Abraham’s justification, it was a sign he already had it, Paul says. A seal declaring he’d already been declared righteous and shown favour by God. Verse 11, ‘He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.’

Now maybe you hear all that and think, ‘what does any of that have to do with me?! Because circumcision is just not something I worry about.’ Sure, but go back to our opening question: what do you have to *do* to get into heaven? What do you have to *do* to be right with God? Go on the hajj? Or a mission trip? Get circumcised or be baptised?

No, Paul is saying. Neither circumcision, nor any other religious practice, adds anything to justification. Instead Abraham was justified by his faith, before he was circumcised, and the order matters, because, v11, ‘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.’

Ok, great, but that begs a question doesn’t it? How can Abraham, or David, or you and I, be declared righteous when we’re not? Surely someone has to *do* something?

They do, Paul says. But it’s Christ who does it, not you. Listen how he puts it to the Corinthians: ‘For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.’ Because whose righteousness is being credited to your account if it’s not yours? The righteousness of the only One who does make the grade, who does pass the test.

And in Genesis 15, right after declaring Abraham righteous, God has him cut three animals in half. And then Abraham watches as a fire pot and torch pass between those pieces and Genesis 15:18 says, ‘on that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram.’

Because back then, if you made a covenant with someone, you’d do exactly what God and Abraham do. You’d cut an animal in half, and the two parties would walk between the bloody carcass, and go, ‘let this be done to me if I break this covenant.’ But here, it’s not Abraham and God who walk between the pieces. God walks alone. And as he does, he is saying, ‘Abraham, if you fail to keep this covenant, if you fail to make the grade, let this be done to me. I will take the blame.’

And at the cross, Christ becomes that bloody sacrifice as he takes the blame and penalty for Abraham and all of us. And David left a man exposed to the enemy so his sin could be covered. But at the cross, Christ was exposed so that our sin might be covered. David engineered it so a man lost his life so his could be saved. But at the cross great David's greater Son refused to save himself, that he might save us.

That's how you can be declared right with God, Paul is saying, by trusting what Christ has done, not what you try and do. By seeing, and believing, 'he took my sin, so that I might receive his righteousness.'

And as you do, you begin to realise that justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, is not once and done.

A Life to be Lived

So, Paul says, Abraham, is the father of the uncircumcised and, v12, '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.'

In other words, the Christian life doesn't stop with justification. There's a walk to be walked. There's a life of faith to be lived - where we live out of the truth of justification by faith.

Because, very briefly, knowing you are counted righteous in Christ, by his grace, will give you an authority, a security, and a community.

Firstly, an authority. Go back to v3: 'For what does the Scripture say?' Or v6, 'Just as David says…' What's Paul doing? He's quoting the Bible as his authority. And something is going to be the authoritative voice in your life, isn't it? Some voice will determine, do you feel good about yourself or crushed? Is something right to do or wrong to do? But when you know Christ loves you so much he died for you, it's his voice, through the Scriptures, that will become your authority.

Secondly, it'll give you a deep security. Because why doesn't David carry on trying to save face and hide his sin? Because he knows that by God's grace it's been dealt with. And this side of the cross, how much more of God's grace do we know than David did? And that means we don't need to be crushed by our failures or pretend they're not there. Instead we can face our sin and begin to change. But also, we can laugh at ourselves, because we don't need to take ourselves too seriously. And there is plenty to laugh at!

But thirdly, understand justification by grace and it will create a community of grace. Because Paul's writing this to Westlake Rome. Think you're made right with God by your righteousness, and you'll have to hide your *un*righteousness. So we'll never get past the superficial. Think you earn God's favour by your religious doing, and you'll always be telling others what they should be doing and church will become one program after another and we'll all end up exhausted. Think you get God's favour by the intensity of your spiritual passion and you'll end up chasing one spiritual high after another, and we'll end up with smoke and lights and it won't just be the fuses that get burnt out.

But realise, I am made right with God because of what Christ has done, and church can become a place of grace, as we call everyone to faith.