

Are We Justified by Faith or by Works?

Romans 4:1-12

Pastor Jason Van Bommel, Forest Hill Presbyterian

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." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness

- Romans 4:2-5, ESV

Imagine you're sick. You have been feeling lousy for a few days, with a sore throat and a fever, so you go to the doctor. The doctor diagnoses you with strep throat. You now know that your regimen of ibuprofen, water and rest will be insufficient to treat this sickness. You need antibiotics, but how do you get them?

This is roughly equivalent to where we are in Romans. We have been told that our sinful condition is too serious to be remedied by obedience to the law, whether that law was written by Moses or written on our conscience. We are condemned by the law, and we need a righteousness from God apart from the law. This righteousness is found in Jesus Christ, but how do we get this righteousness?

Some people would argue that you have to earn it. They say only good works can bring us the merit to receive the righteousness of Christ. Even some Christians who would say we can only be saved by God's grace through the righteousness found in Jesus Christ might say that we have to do good works - acts of penance and devotion - in order to attain the righteousness of Christ. Paul says something very different in Romans 4.

Paul tells us that God's people have always been justified by faith and not by works. To support his claim, he brings in two pillars of the Old Testament church, Abraham and David. Abraham is the father of the faith, and David was called the man after God's own heart. Both of them were justified by faith and not by works. Paul has two key texts to support these claims:

"Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness." - Genesis 15:6

*"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." - Psalm 32:1-2*

The counter-argument in Paul's day would have come from the Judaizers, who would have claimed that Abraham was justified by circumcision. But Paul says, rightly, that circumcision was given to Abraham after he had already believed God and had been counted as righteous through faith alone. Circumcision is not a means of justification but a sign and seal of justification by faith.

Any works we attempt to bring to God as a grounds for our justification automatically become self-righteousness. This is because to be justified is to be declared righteous, and if we want our good works to be either the basis or the means of our justification, then we are wanting to contribute to our own justification. It is, by definition, a self-righteousness.

To be justified by faith alone is just another way to say that we are justified by Jesus alone. He has all of the righteousness. He has done all of the work. Being justified by faith is looking to Jesus and Jesus alone as the basis of our salvation, from beginning to end.

Martin Luther understood this 500 years ago, and his re-discovery of this truth changed the world.