

Romans 4:1-12 - What's the best thing about being a Christian?

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[0 : 00] Good morning, Church. Good morning. For today's reading, can we turn our Bibles to Romans 4, verse 1 to 12. For anybody with these Bibles, it's on page 1131.

Romans 4. What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefathers, 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.

What does Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. 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 trust God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. 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. Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?

[1 : 23] 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. 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. 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.

May the Lord's name glorify him. Thanks, Tim. Well, keep the passage open in front of you, and do follow along as we work our way through it together.

But let me pray as we come to look at God's word. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, there's something sort of gloriously ordinary about what we're doing together.

[2 : 38] We're looking at a book and trying to understand it together. But in the ordinariness of that, you do something extraordinary by your spirit. You do something extraordinary by your spirit.

And you speak to us. You change us and transform us. You bring us from death to life. You help us persevere. You encourage us and equip us.

And so we pray that our experience might be that this morning. That because of the work of your spirit, because these are your words, you would be at work for the sake of your glory.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. I wonder if I could ask you as we start, what is the best thing about being a Christian? What's the best thing about being a Christian?

What is the great advantage of the Christian life over and above any other kind of life? Maybe you're not a Christian this morning, and you're thinking, that's a very good question.

[3 : 40] I mean, to become a Christian is to be called to give up so much, isn't it? You know, the Bible's sexual ethic seems pretty restrictive, and the call to generosity, well, that seems pretty miserable, really.

The encouragement to love others, even when you don't really like them, doesn't sound so great either. You know, what is the good thing about being a Christian? What is the best thing about being a Christian?

Or maybe you're a Christian this morning, and you hear that question, and you think, well, yeah, that's a good question, because actually I'm finding my life quite a lot harder than I thought I would. I became a Christian, and I thought that might mean that God was therefore on my side, and things would work out as I hoped they would.

But that doesn't seem to be happening for me. So what is the blessing of the Christian life? You know, if I'm not promised a long life, if I'm not promised healing from every sickness, if I don't get the job I want or a secure home, then what is the good of being a Christian?

Well, listen, this morning, however that kind of question lands on you, we will come to it again at the end. I want to try and show you from our passage this morning that the blessedness, or the blessing of the Christian life, the great advantage of being a Christian, is justification.

[4 : 57] In other words, it is this being credited by God with righteousness, or being declared by God that we are in the right with him.

I want to suggest to you this morning that that declaration, and grabbing a hold of that and knowing that that is yours, that itself is worth more than good health, long life, material wealth, wealth, marriage, family, all the riches of Egypt.

And so let me just try and break our time down into two parts as we look at the passage. I want us to start with what is justification, and then I want to think about why it's so great. So let's start with what is justification. I think probably one of the clearest definitions of justification in the Bible is given for us in these verses.

Look down at verse 3. What does scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Word righteousness, same as the word justification in the original.

He was given justification. 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.

[6 : 14] Here Paul is proving his definition of justification by using the Old Testament character Abraham as an example. And his point is that if you've read the Old Testament, it should be obvious to you that Abraham received righteousness as a gift, not as wages for a job that he did.

It's not that Abraham worked and God saw that work and thought, there's a good guy. I'm going to give him righteousness on the basis of his works. No, Abraham trusted, literally the word that is, believed or had faith, and he received righteousness, received justification as a gift.

So verse 5, he did not work, but trusted and is credited as righteous. Now, be careful here. It's not that Abraham's faith is the essential work in order to receive justification.

It's not like, okay, listen, of all the good works I've seen Abraham do, well, he's got that one, which is faith. And that's the particular one that I'm interested in. And when I see that work, then I give righteousness.

No, it's not at all. Faith, as we'll see more next week and we were seeing last week, is simply an empty hand that receives the gift of God's give-away-able righteousness. It's just worth, I think, us thinking a little bit more about Paul's illustration here, this contrast between wages and a gift, wages and a gift.

[7 : 38] Imagine for a moment that someone has said to you, listen, I would like you to dig a hole in the ground. It's a big hole, it's going to take you all day, and I'll pay you £100 at the end of the day if you dig a hole in the ground for me.

So you work hard all day digging a hole. You've got blisters on your hands. You've sweated through your T-shirt. You've got mud in your boots. And then at the end of the day, the boss comes and he says, listen, I'm going to be really kind to you.

I am such a nice guy. I am going to be generous to you. Here's £100. Just as a sign of my overwhelming generosity towards you, what would you say?

Hang on a minute. Look at the hole. Look at the blisters on my hands. Look at the sweat on my brow. Look at the mud in my boots. I've been working hard all day. Don't you dare say that that gift is an expression of your generosity.

It's my wages. It's what you said you'd pay me. That money is what I deserve. Now, Paul says that's the mistake that many people make about justification.

[8 : 46] They think approval from God comes as wages. Swap digging holes for being good for a moment. Perhaps we've tried really hard to be good. I've not been as bad as other people.

I handed my homework in on time every time. That's not actually true of me, but it might be true of you. Perhaps you live a clean life.

You don't do drugs. You don't sleep around. You try to be kind to everyone. And then someone stands up and says, no, actually, what you really need is righteousness as a gift, not wages, a gift. And you're offended.

Wait a minute. Look at all these good things I've done. Do they count for nothing? You know, look at the moral blisters on my hand and the sweat on my brow and the mud in my boots.

You know, I've not been as bad as I could be. I've been working myself to the bone to receive approval. Now, Paul's point here is that, listen, of course righteousness from God cannot work like that.

[9 : 43] Approval from God can't work like that. Firstly, because no one boasts in front of God. No one speaks like that in front of God. It doesn't sound right. We know that instinctively, don't we? That's what verse 2 says.

And that's because deep down we know, don't we, that none of us are actually good enough to receive the righteous approval of God because the righteous approval of God is the declaration that we are absolutely perfect in every way, completely holy, without sin.

And none of us deserve that, do we? None of us can earn that and say we instinctively know that boasting is excluded. I mean, secondly, though, if justification worked like that, how would you know whether anyone had it?

Think about it like that. If Abraham was justified by works and not as a gift, if it was his wages for his righteousness, how could you be sure that he made it? I mean, he did do some good stuff, didn't he?

He left his home. He went in the opposite direction of migrating humanity in obedience to God. He displayed a willingness to sacrifice his own son. He also did some morally dubious things like lying about his wife that had been taken in by a foreign king.

[10 : 50] He had an illegitimate child with his wife's servant. But still the Bible clearly makes him the father of faith, the great father of all of God's people. And Paul says that's because he didn't earn that salvation.

Instead, verse three, it was credited to him, not as wages, verse four, but as a gift. A gift before even the work of circumcision, which came later, as Paul explains in verses nine to 12.

In fact, I think if you look down at verse five, Paul puts it even more starkly than just that. Let me just read it to you again. Notice this with me. However, to the one who does not work, but trust God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

Now, I think if you listen carefully, this will blow your mind, right? At least it should. Notice what are people like as they receive this declaration from God that they're absolutely righteous.

What are they like? What does he say? God who justifies the deserving, the pretty good, no, the ungodly. In other words, the gift of justification is given to those who by definition don't deserve it.

[12 : 05] Now, go back to the digging a hole illustration for a moment. The truth is that spiritually and morally, we haven't been setting about the task that God gave us at all. If that was the task, we'd have done the opposite.

We'd have built a mound, not dug a hole, not even picked up the spade. We are called, aren't we, to live all of our lives for God and his glory. God gives you life to live for him and his glory, and we live it for ourselves and our own glory.

We've not even begun to do what God has called us to do. And Paul says, still people like that receive payment. A gift, the opposite of wages. People who do not work.

Because wages, if we were to receive the wages for what we've done, would be an immediate firing, wouldn't it? For laziness and inappropriate activity. Now, of course, we know, don't we, from chapter three, that God's ability to call ungodly people righteous, it's not a trick, is it?

It's not a trick that God is playing to, you know, compromise morally. It doesn't involve God becoming less holy to declare us holy. Instead, we know this power comes from the cross, don't we?

[13 : 15] Where Jesus paid for our sin and gifted us his righteousness. But here the focus is not so much Christ's atoning work, but it is us as we receive it. And the point here is that we are totally undeserving in every single way.

I know that sometimes sermons like this can be a bit complicated, right? So let me just try and rebuild where we are. This is what we've got so far. Our justification is the declaration by God that we are holy, righteous.

We receive it as a gift, and it's given to those who, by definition, are undeserving. That's where we are so far. Next, notice the tense, the tense of this.

Notice that it is not that the ungodly will one day be justified as soon as they clean up their lives and show themselves worthy of such a declaration. It's not even that God will justify them on the final day of judgment when they stand before him as long as they show the right kind of level of commitment between now and then.

No, rather the point is that justification is received at the point of belief, even ahead of final judgment. Think about it like this. Some of you love Strictly, right?

[14 : 30] Well, I know at least one person does, and I have no idea why, to be honest. But God bless you anyway. But in that show, as far as I can tell, right, in that show, couples dance, yeah?

And the judges judge. And then they do that kind of little awkward run up to the top, and Claudia Winkleman says, you know, she talks to them a bit for a while, and then she says, the scores are in, right?

And then you pan back to the judges who hold up paddles, giving the kind of judgment on the dance, right? You know, whether it's a justified score, you know, like a 10, or a condemning score, like a 3, or a 2, or a 1.

Well, listen, just to imagine that as a scenario that helps us understand this. In life, if you like, we're in the middle of a dance, and we're making a terrible mess of it.

I mean, you might look at other couples dancing and think, well, I'm doing a better job than they are, frankly, but honestly, it's no real significance because we're all dancing in the wrong direction, if that can be a thing.

[15 : 31] And judgment is looming. And we know, all of us know instinctively, that there will come a point when the scores will be in, and God the judge will judge.

And we know, because we can feel it in our feet at the moment, that that score will not be a good one. It will be condemnation, not salvation. It will be exclusion from God, not inclusion with him.

It will be judgment and not glory. But here, in Paul's doctrine of justification, what happens effectively is God steps onto the dance floor in the middle of the dance.

Before Claudia Winkleman has time to say the scores are in, he hands you a perfect set of tens and says, those are yours.

Hold on to them for judgment. And so for you, even while you're dancing, the scores are already in, even before they're in, because you've got them and you know what will be said.

[16 : 34] And the score is perfection. Absolute perfection. So that when you stand in front of the judges and you do that awkward run up the stairs and you trip over your high heels or whatever, then hear the words scores are in, you know, I'm safe.

I'm justified. I'm perfect. Even though I was making a terrible mess on the dance floor. Because the perfect tens have been given to me, they've been imputed to me, they've been credited to me while I was dancing by God himself.

And it's not, is it, because God is blind to our missteps and our poor timing, but because really Jesus, who is the Lord of the dance floor, has credited us with his dance, even as he took our dance on himself.

That's justification. Romans 4 verse 5, the one who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness today.

Let me say here that this doctrine of justification gets contradicted all the time. Let me just point out a few ways that that happens, just so that we're clear on what this is. You don't have to speak to many people, you don't have to listen to many podcasts, you don't have to watch too many YouTube sermons or Instagram reels before you find someone contradicting what I've just said.

[17 : 56] And religious people particularly hate this. Others do as well. But they say something like this. Listen, what are you meaning to say to me that if the drug dealer on my street, who is a terrible person, if he turns and trusts in Christ, does he know today that he will be safe on judgment day in the presence of God, while my aunt, who has no interest in Jesus Christ, and actually refuses anything to do with him, but is really a rather lovely person, she's going to be condemned by God on that day?

Is that what you're telling me? Is she lost and he's safe? That is exactly what Paul is saying. And he's not saying it because God takes some kind of pleasure in condemning your aunt, but because the gift of alien righteousness from Christ to the undeserving sinner is the only possible way to be holy before God.

No one else will be. People also contradict it, they don't they, by building some kind of Christian hierarchy. I don't know if you've noticed this in life, but people love to think they're better than others.

And they look down their noses, they say, you mean you can't find the book of Zephaniah yet? Are you sure you're really a Christian? But what's wrong with that?

Well, justifications say that if any of us are saved this morning, it's because we've received righteousness from Jesus in his gift of justification, which means it doesn't matter whether you became a Christian 15 minutes ago or 15 years ago, you are just as righteous as one another before God because the righteousness that you have before God is gifted to you.

[19 : 42] It's Jesus's, it's not yours. It means as well, doesn't it, that when you have a bad day, you ever have a bad day? Maybe you lost your way, you struggled and lost in the battle with temptation, you didn't read your Bible, you didn't share the gospel on a bus, and you did swear when you trod in the puddle and flooded your new trainers with muddy water.

On that day, you are no less righteous before God than on the day that you spend all day in church singing songs on your face before Jesus. Why? Because your righteousness was gifted to you by the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's justification. You have the perfect tens in your pocket, even in the middle of the dance. Right, that's justification. Why is justification so good?

I want us to think carefully about this because I don't think this is always very well understood. I think we can often take justification as a starter. So maybe you've been a Christian a little while and you're thinking, Steve, I know all of this.

Literally, I could have done what you're doing now. I could have said all that. I don't know why you're there. What are you doing? Right, I know justification. This is also straightforward. Get to the practical bits, right?

[20 : 51] Get to the bit where God helps me with my relationships and my work. Tell me about that bit. Let's not move on so fast. Look at how verse six talks about justification. Let me read verses six to eight to you again.

Look down in your Bibles. David says the same thing. So we've swapped Abraham. We're now thinking about David, King David. He 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. Now notice that Paul is saying, David is speaking about the same thing, right?

In other words, David here in this psalm is talking about justification. In Psalm 32, David is talking about forgiveness, having sin covered. He says that the Lord is counting our sinfulness, is not counting our sinfulness against us.

And that is David's understanding of justification, credited righteousness, says Paul in verse six. This forgiveness is, says Paul, the counterpart of having righteousness credited apart from works.

[22 : 01] But notice the word that David uses is not justification, it's the word what? Blessedness. It's interesting, isn't it? It's not just to have a blessing, as in that's a good thing to have.

It's about being blessed, a blessed one. So that this is the blessedness that defines someone who is in possession of justification. Now I submit to you, that's strange.

What's so good about forgiveness, you might think? Now after all, we forgive people all the time. But notice here, it seems that this forgiveness is not just about God dealing with our sin.

It seems to me that this is God dealing with our sin in a way which transforms our whole identity. Do you see that? So that we become people who are by definition, the blessed ones.

Go back to the dance floor for a moment. And imagine that those straight tens that you've been given are pushed into your back pocket. And so as you dance around the dance floor, the most obvious thing about you is no longer the sequins, right?

[23 : 08] Or whatever silly outfit you're wearing. But it's the tens in your back pocket. Nobody notices the moves that you're making anymore because all they can see is these giant paddles that say ten on the back.

Your whole identity is transformed because of the possession of those perfect tens. Now that's it here. The blessedness is the justification that we have today.

The justification of the gospel means that we are by definition blessed by God. In other words, holding justification today is being in receipt of the best thing God can give you.

So regardless of whatever else is true in your life, if you have this, you have the blessedness of God. Think about what that means for a moment.

It means, doesn't it, if David is right here, if the blessed Christian is the one who is in receipt of justification, it means that the blessed Christian can also be the suffering Christian.

[24 : 11] Because the blessing of being a Christian is not the blessing of health or wealth or the absence of difficulty. You know, people say that, don't they? That's not right. That's saying that the blessedness is something in addition to justification.

But David disagrees. Blessedness is being in receipt of justification. It means the blessed Christian can also be the single Christian who longs to be married. It can be the Christian whose dreams didn't come true.

You know, the blessed Christian can have wayward children, no job, be struggling with depression. Because blessedness of God is receipt of justification. Let me try and land this.

I know we're in the realm of ideas, but let me try and persuade you of how good this is. Let me show you two contrasts that are implied as we finish. Firstly, notice this essentially means that this is relational, not material.

Blessing in the Christian life is not having all that you want. It's not being healthy. It's not having a long life. The blessing of the Christian life is not removed from us by the presence of suffering.

[25 : 15] No. The blessing of the Christian life is not that. David says, blessed are those, not who have a good job, a nice flat, a good career, a long life, a big family and a beautiful wife.

The blessing of the Christian life is justification, which means that it is not firstly material, but relational. They receive notice justification from God.

They're covered by God. They believe in God. I think this is perhaps where we're going to have to make our biggest adjustment in our thinking about justification. Justification is the blessedness of the Christian life because justification is the receipt of the righteousness that belongs to Jesus.

Not so much because Jesus has sort of torn away his righteousness and given it to you, but rather because Jesus has given you himself and his righteousness.

This is what we find over and over again in the book of Romans and the rest of the New Testament that it hardly ever talks about becoming a Christian, right? Or giving your life to Christ as if he needed something. Rather, becoming a Christian is receiving Christ himself.

[26 : 16] The Christian is someone who is in Christ and receives his righteousness from him in relationship with him. Let me try and put this the other way around. You cannot have the blessedness of the gospel without having Christ.

And you can't have Christ without also having along with him the blessedness of the Christian life. Those are inseparable from one another. Go back to the dance floor.

I really only did this illustration for Jen and she's in Sunday school because she loves Strictly, so you'll have to tell her when you see her. But really what's going on here, it's not so much that the tens are in your pocket, are they?

But it's really that you've been swept up in the arms of someone who is a professional dancer and they're doing it right. The Christian, we've been swept up in the arms of Jesus and he is perfect in every way.

And when God looks at us, he doesn't see the mess that we're making, but he sees the perfection of the Lord Jesus. And so it's a relational blessing that comes through our inclusion in Christ.

[27 : 21] It's not material. Now, of course, you know that, don't you? You know that the best bits about life are not material, they're relational, don't you? You would rather live in a studio flat with someone who loved you than you would live in a great mansion with people who hated you.

You know that, don't you? Because relational blessings are greater than material ones. You know, don't you, that if you fall out with your closest friend, you go out to buy a new set of clothes to help you heal from the heartbreak.

It doesn't work, does it? You know that. You can't compensate relational loss with material gain. It doesn't work like that. Because relational blessings are always the greatest. But Paul's point here is that the relationship that you really need, the one that you were really made for, is knowing God.

That is the relationship that you were made for. And knowing that you're right with him, knowing that you're included in Christ and having his blessings, that is what you are made for.

To join this family of faith that Abraham is the father of, that we were reading in verse 12. That relationship is the blessedness of the gospel. And it doesn't matter what you have. If you don't have that through justification, you have nothing.

[28 : 33] Nothing worth it. Because this is what you were made for. You know, being a Christian might not mean that all your material dreams come true. But it will mean that you are known, loved, cared for, in closest possible communion with the God who made you.

And blessings don't come richer than that. There is nothing richer than that. Secondly, though, it is liberating and not enslaving. There's something profoundly liberating about this justification.

Think about it. Justification, you can use the word sort of approval, right? So justification from God being declared righteous is God looking at you and approving of you. Saying, yes, they are holy.

Yes, they are in the right. Yes, they are righteous. I approve of them. And we know all, don't we, about that kind of quest for approval. It's why we spend so much of our lives slavishly looking for the approval of others.

You know, why do you work so hard? Well, because you want your boss to turn to you and say, really well done. Have a pay rise. I approve. Or, you want your parents to approve.

[29 : 44] You want your parents to go to parents' evening and come back and say, you're all smashing this school thing. This is great. You're doing a brilliant job. It's why we spend money in the way we do because we want people to look at us and go, you look great.

I'm not going to point in any particular. You look great. I approve of what you look like. We want people to like us, to move towards us. But all those approvals are the approval of works and the quest for them sort of enslaves us, doesn't it?

As we work hard to receive that positive feedback from the people that we care about. There's a guy called Alain de Botton who wrote a book about 20 years ago called Status Anxiety.

Don't know whether you've heard of the book. He defines status anxiety like this. A worry so pernicious as to be capable of ruining extended stretches of our lives.

It's a worry that we are in danger of failing to conform to the ideals of success laid down by our society and that we may as a result be stripped of dignity and respect.

[30 : 43] A worry that we are currently occupying too modest a rung of the status ladder or are about to fall to a lower one. That's what he says, status anxiety is. The book became a worldwide bestseller because Alain was onto something, wasn't he?

Perhaps you feel it. But the extraordinary thing about status anxiety is that everybody feels it. It doesn't matter how much you have, you feel it. So the strange thing is that status anxiety is not solved by a better status because you still have it.

It's a kind of slavery. The sad thing is, is Alain in his book offers absolutely no solution to it at all. He says perhaps we should talk about it. Well, no help is it? Now doubtless the Apostle Paul would be bewildered by Alain's book, I'm sure, and all the other self-help books.

But he would tell us, I think, that your search for approval is really just an echo of a deeper hunger that you have that you were built for for God's approval. What you really need in life is not the approval from those around you so much as approval from the God who made you.

And that approval is given to the undeserving who put their faith in Jesus Christ and he gives it to them. And then you can know, can't you, that the God who sees and knows looks at you and approves of you.

[32 : 07] Not because of what you've done, but because of Jesus Christ. Because you have received his righteousness. That blessedness, says Paul, is on offer to all who believe.

It's liberation, isn't it? It's an approval in glory as a gift I didn't earn. And so I can go about my life knowing that God loves me and approves of me because of Christ.

You start to me with this question, what's the best thing about being a Christian? Let me submit to you that it's justification. Being declared holy by God as a gift, a gift that you possess now, holy in his sight, approved of by the God who made you, approved in Christ his son.

Now that's something that money can't buy you. If you had all the material success of the world and you didn't have that, you'd have nothing. It's something death can't rob you of because death will show you its glory.

It's something that liberates you from the tyranny of works so that no longer is your identity built on your own flimsy success, but it is a gift of God in Christ. We, you if you trust in Christ, are the blessed one this morning.

[33 : 22] Praise his name. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that approval from you, righteousness from you, is not something that we earn in our own rights from our own good works, but it's something that you give through faith in Jesus Christ.

Christ. Oh, please, Lord, would you liberate us from the tyranny of working for the approval of others as we know that you look on us and smile.

Pray, please, Lord, that you might help us to hold on to this great doctrine, build our lives and our hopes on it as we trust in Jesus and all that he's done for us.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.