

How God Justifies the Ungodly – Part 2

By David Harrell
Romans 4:9-17

I would like to ask you to bow your heads for a moment and just quiet your heart before the Lord before I minister the Word to you.

As you know, it is that season of the year in our country where we remember our fallen dead who have given the ultimate sacrifice for the freedom of our country. We have all lost friends and family members because of wars down through the years and I would like to take just a moment and remember these families in prayer and thank the Lord for their sacrifice.

Father, we acknowledge that we are citizens of another kingdom, that this world is not our home. Nevertheless by your grace you have given us a wonderful country in which to live, a country that in so many ways is a product of the Reformation, a country that has been the greatest country in the history of the world. And although we see it gradually disintegrating because of the ravages of sin, nevertheless we continue to see your hand of protection upon us. And we realize that the instruments that you have used to protect us down through the years have been the men and women that have worn the uniform of the United States military. Lord, we thank you for their sacrifice. We thank you for those who are serving even today, some who are a part of our church family who are in harm's way. Lord, we pray that you will protect them and bring them home safely. We pray that you would minister to the needs of their family, their families as they are left here behind. But, Lord, we pray especially for the families of those who have lost loved ones especially over the last few years as we continue to fight an enemy that is inspired by such a demonic religion as Islam. Lord, we pray that you will minister to those families and cause them to look much upon the face of Christ, to look much into your Word that they might understand the big picture of ultimately what you are doing over the course of redemptive history for your glory. So, Lord, we pray for these families and we pray for our country. We pray that you will protect us from leaders who know nothing of your truth and who mock at your Word. But, Lord, may we be submissive to their authority as you have asked us to be that your name might be glorified. Oh, Lord, we pray that our leaders would come to know the truth of the gospel and that even in the midst of the chaos in our country today, that many people would be sobered to the reality that our politicians are not the answer. The only answer is Christ. And, Lord, may we be testimony to that end as individuals and as a church. So we lift our country up to you. We lift our church up to you. We lift each of us up to you that we might be a shining beacon of light in a very dark and lost world. So thank you, again, Lord, for our military and all those that have sacrificed for us. Bless their families and may their memory be honored by each and every one of us for the glory of Christ. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Let's take our Bible and turn to Romans chapter four this morning. This is the second part of a series entitled, "How God Justifies the Ungodly."

Over the course of the last several years I have had an opportunity to go to Russia, particularly Siberia to help train pastors there and in the course of my travels I have been

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able to encounter the most virulent enemy of biblical Christianity in Russia. And that is the Russian Orthodox Church. It is very similar to Roman Catholicism. It even has a lot of similarities to Mormonism. And on several occasions I had the opportunity to tour the cathedral of Christ the Savior which is in Moscow. Perhaps you have seen pictures of it. It is just a few blocks from the Kremlin, a massive, ornate cathedral that will hold 10,000 people. It is a very flamboyant building designed in the neo classical architecture. It is full of symbols of freemasonry, interestingly enough, which is, as I told you last week, a false religious system, a unique blend of the occult, paganism, Satanism and so forth and a systems of salvation by works which is a fitting description of the Russian Orthodox Church.

I might also add that free masonry has undeniable parallels with Mormonism because Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church and even Brigham Young later on were both 32nd degree masons. And so you see how Satan takes all of these lies and mixes them together in various kinds of false religious systems.

But if you go inside this magnificent Russian Orthodox cathedral there in Moscow, you will be struck with just the beauty of the all of the frescoes that are all around depicting events and persons in the life and history of Russia and of the Orthodox Church. You will hear lovely a capella choirs that are singing and they are hidden up somewhere in the up in the second floor area. And you will see all around that church hundreds of different icons of various saints and if you have a particular spiritual need or a physical need you choose the icon that represents that particular saint. So if you have a heart problem you go to one. If you have a financial problems you may go to one over here. If you have a marital problem you go to one over here and you pray these icons and the people are kissing the icons.

And, of course, there is thousands of candles all around. People will come and purchase candles and they will stick the candle either in a sand box that is high or one that is at a lower level and if you are praying for someone who is alive you stick the candle in the little sand boxes that are around on the high level and if you are praying for someone who is dead, you stick it in the lower level. And so they believe that people can receive salvation after death and that they can be delivered from something similar to purgatory and all kinds of superstitious things that have no bearing in biblical truth.

But what is interesting as you look around at the people you will watch them very emotional as they go to these various places to pray and they go to the various icons and it is fascinating. If you look at the icons many times in the left hand of the icon you will see that particular image of a person holding, for example, a church. And what will happen is if you gave a lot of money and helped to furnish money of a church or whatever, than you receive sainthood. I tell you. It is a great way of raising money.

And so many of the people that become these saints become icons are really people that have given a lot of money or done some great thing for the church.

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But if you were to ask the Russian Orthodox, “How does God justify the ungodly?” they will be quick to tell you that it is through grace plus works. For example, in order to be saved, in order to be justified before God you just need to be baptized as an infant and then you are in the kingdom, so to speak, and if that doesn’t happen when you are an infant then later on, for a small fee, the priest will baptize you and then everything is taken care of.

But it is important for them to keep traditions, to continue to work in order to maintain their religious status and they have various fastings and rituals and ceremonies, very superstitious. Most of the people are absolutely clueless as to why they do what they do.

They are not allowed, interestingly enough, to read the Bible. That is only for the priests because they are the only ones that can understand it. One of our dear brothers here at church, Mickey, has come out of that background. He has told me some fascinating stories, one that I will share with you.

He said that he was visiting a friend back in Serbia. They were having breakfast together and this man was married or was not married to a woman that was with him. She had had his baby and so forth. They were living together. And when they ordered breakfast Mickey ordered some cream to go in his coffee and his friend was very quick to say, “No, no, no, no. You can’t have cream. It is holy Friday. No dairy products.”

And he saw no contradiction between his immorality and the fastidious keeping of some religious rule that he had no idea what it meant.

So very superstitious. But they believe that these are the kinds of things that ensure salvation.

So obviously the Russian orthodox Church and others like it despise biblical Christianity, primarily because of the topic that Paul is dealing with here in Romans four, because we believe in justification by grace alone.

I have read some of the Orthodox study Bible and one section says this, quote, “Justification by faith alone brings up an objection. It contradicts Scripture which says...” And then they quote James 2:24.

“Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”¹

They go on to say, “We are, quote, justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law, Romans 3:28, but nowhere does the Bible say we are justified by faith, quote, alone. On the contrary, quote, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. James 2:27 or 2:17.”

¹ James 2:24.

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Now this is a classic example of how people can misinterpret the Bible and use faulty exegesis, biased exegesis. For example it does say in James 2:24, “You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.”²

Now if you pull that just out of that context you say, “Whoa. Boy, so much of grace alone. It says right here man is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

But you must understand that the term “justification” δικαιοω (dik-ah-yo’-o) in the original language has two general meanings. One it means acquittal. It has the idea of declaring or treating a person as righteous as Paul said in Romans 3:24, “We are justified or declared righteous as a gift by God’s grace through redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”

But there is another meaning to justification and that pertains to the idea of vindication or the proof of righteousness. For example in Romans three and verse four we see it used this way. Paul says, “Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, ‘THAT THOU MIGHTEST BE JUSTIFIED [literally vindicated or proven righteous] IN THY WORDS, AND MIGHTEST PREVAIL WHEN THOU ART JUDGED.’”³

Likewise Paul told Timothy that the Lord Jesus Christ in 1 Timothy 3:16. “was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated,”⁴ and that is from δικαιοω (dik-ah-yo’-o), that same term, he “was vindicated in the Spirit, Beheld by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory.”⁵

Likewise Jesus used the term in this way in Luke 7:35. He commented that, quote, “wisdom is vindicated [or in other words justified] by all her children,”⁶ meaning that true wisdom is vindicated by its consequences, by what it produces. And it is in this second sense that the term justified is used in James 2:21 where we read:

“Was not Abraham our father justified [in other words vindicated] by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?”⁷

Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice was a supreme demonstration that he had been justified which, according to Genesis 15:16 had happened many years before Isaac. So Abraham’s works of faith vindicated or proved to the whole world the fact that he had been justified by grace alone. That was James’ point. His whole argument. He had already stated in James 1:17-18 that salvation is a perfect gift from above. And in

² Ibid.

³ Romans 3:4.

⁴ 1 Timothy 3:16.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Luke 7:35.

⁷ James 2:21.

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chapter two verse 23 he clearly states that Abraham believed God and it was recognized... reckoned to him as righteousness.

So all that to say James 2:24, the text that the Orthodox Church uses to argue justification by works argues just the opposite. James is saying, "You see that a man is justified,"⁸ meaning he is vindicated, he is proven righteous" by works and not by faith alone."⁹

Verse 22 it goes on to say, "You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected."¹⁰

Now all of that to say Satan hates it when we do this. He hates it when we look closely at Scripture. And he hates it when people say that we are justified by grace alone, because if it is by grace alone, who gets all the glory? God gets all the glory. Satan hates that. Moreover, with a works righteousness you mitigate the glory of the cross. So who needs Christ to do what we can do, right? That is where all of this ultimately goes.

One final thought. Satan needs this system to fund his counterfeit church, a great way of making money. Convince people that they can somehow buy their way into heaven and they will give everything.

So perhaps you had better understand now why millions and millions of people have died because of these five solas around this sanctuary, five truths that have caused millions of people their lives, sola Scriptura, that we believe in Scripture alone, not Scripture plus tradition; sola Christus, we believe Christ alone; salvation is sola gratia, it is through grace by grace alone; sola fide by faith alone; sola Deo Gloria, to the glory of God alone. And so forth.

Well, with that, we once again return to the apostles' thorough explanation of this issue. How does God justify the ungodly? And he uses the example of Abraham because this doctrine is so thoroughly misunderstood and misused.

Was it truly by works as some claim?

Well, obviously it was not. It was solely by grace.

The passage we will look at this morning begins in verse nine through verse 17. Let me read it to you. Romans four verse nine.

Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS RECKONED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while

⁸ James 2:24.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ James 2:22.

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uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised. For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the sight of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.¹¹

Now, knowing the arguments that the Jews would put forth regarding this whole issue of how God justifies the ungodly, this wise former rabbi that now follows Christ, this brilliant theologian uses the example of Abraham to make his case and Paul draws his audience into asking three things that he knows they are going to ask. How did Abraham receive three things? How did he receive his righteousness? How did he receive his inheritance? How did he receive his posterity? And we have seen with respect to the first major question here—how did Abraham receive his righteousness in verses three through 12—that it was not by works. That was the first point of last week. We see that in verses one and two. It was not by works. Secondly, it was through faith in God and we studied that in verses three through eight. But, thirdly, we see that it was not by circumcision. We are going to see that in verses nine through 12.

Notice how his argument continues in verse nine. He says, “Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, ‘FAITH WAS RECKONED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.’”¹²

Well, you see, this is a critical question, because the Jews believed that the act of circumcision was an act of obedience that not only set them apart as God’s chosen people, but it actually reconciled them to God, that it made them acceptable to God.

If you study the rabbinical teachings on this you will see this throughout. For example, in one Jewish commentary, the Midrash Millim it says, quote, “God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell,” end quote.

¹¹ Romans 4:9-17.

¹² Romans 4:9.

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So naturally they would insist that because of circumcision they had their ticket punched. All right? They are on their way to heaven. Everything is taken care of.

Moreover, the uncircumcised Gentiles are excluded. Only those that keep the law of Moses can be saved.

Now you will remember this problem was significant in the early Church. You remember the Judaizers who came along in the early Church and they insisted that Jewish or that Gentile converts to Christianity had to also obey portions of the Mosaic law, especially circumcision. And that problem was addressed, for example, in Acts 15 in the counsel of Jerusalem where they put it in a letter and distributed it to all of the churches that this is not true, that Gentile converts need not be circumcised.

Because to somehow arbitrarily transport a certain aspects of the Mosaic law with respect to holy days or ceremonies or rituals or whatever, all of that undermines the work of Christ for all that believe. But this was a persistent threat in the early Church.

Paul addressed it in Galatians five verses one through four. There we read:

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.¹³

Verse six he says, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.”¹⁴

Now Paul also understood that many of these Judaizers that were insisting that the Gentiles be circumcised were nothing more than hypocrites. They were hiding behind their circumcision because they wanted to protect themselves from their fellow Jews who would persecute them because now they are dabbling in this Christianity stuff. Paul addressed this in Galatians six verse 12.

He says, “Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.”¹⁵

So, knowing all these issues so thoroughly as a former Pharisee, Paul poses this question in verse nine.

¹³ Galatians 5:1-4.

¹⁴ Galatians 5:6.

¹⁵ Galatians 6:12.

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“ Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, ‘FAITH WAS RECKONED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.’”¹⁶

Verse 10.

“How then was it reckoned?”¹⁷

He knows that is what they are going to be asking.

“While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised?”¹⁸

And he answers it.

“Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.”¹⁹

Now wait a minute. Wait a minute, the Jews said. Hold on just a minute. According to Genesis chapter 17 verse 10 through 14 we see that all of Abraham’s descendants, the Jews, needed to be circumcised. God commanded that. That was a mark of his covenant to Abraham and to all of them. So for this reason the Jews were adamant that circumcision was what made Abraham and all of his descendants acceptable to God.

But what they didn’t understand and what Paul now is going to prove is that Abraham’s faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. In other words, he was justified while he was yet uncircumcised. In fact, it was at least 14 years before God entered into his covenant relationship with him and required him to be circumcised as a mark of his covenant.

So he was made, declared righteous 14 years before the requirement to be circumcised.

Scripture is clear. Abraham received his righteousness in Genesis 15:6. Then in Genesis 16:6 we read that Abraham was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him. But it was not until chapter 17 verses 25 through 26 that we learned that Abraham was 99 years old when God asked him to be circumcised.

You see, Abraham had his righteousness 14 years before his circumcision which utterly refutes any notion that God justified him on the basis of his circumcision. That is Paul’s whole point here.

Isn’t it fascinating? Think about it. The Jews were absolutely convinced that the Gentiles could only enter into a relationship with God through the same door that they had entered, namely circumcision. And yet Paul reverses the door here and proves just the opposite. He proves just the opposite. He is saying that the Jew can only enter in the same

¹⁶ Romans 4:9.

¹⁷ Romans 4:10.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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way as the Gentiles of which Abraham was once one. And how is that? What is that door? By grace through faith alone.

By the way, I have to pause here. Whenever I think of these things I think, wow. How compelling the Scripture is, how powerful is the Word of God. I love this. It proves, yet again, this great doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, theologians call it. Perspicuity means the idea of being able to make something understandable. The Word of God is understandable. It is not some mysterious riddle. God gives us clear language.

And so Paul is arguing this whole issue that Abraham was declared righteous well before he was circumcised.

And notice the argument goes on in verse 11.

He knows that the next logical question is going to be, ok, ok, if Abraham did not receive his righteousness on the basis of circumcision, if that is the case, then what was it designed to accomplish? Why would God have us do this?

In verse 11 he says, “He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them.”²⁰

Now let me help you understand this. Notice the phrase, “he received the sign of circumcision.”²¹

Well, what is a sign? A sign is something that signifies a fact. It points to something. And in this case it pointed to two things. One, it pointed to the physical lineage of Abraham, the Jew. It was a mark of their ethnicity.

You will recall in Acts chapter 16 and verse three Paul personally circumcised Timothy who was only half Jewish. Remember his father was a Greek. And he did that for the sake of practicality, for expediency. It was a useful thing for Paul to do. It had nothing to do with salvation. It had nothing to do with Legalism. It was all for the purpose of being able to spread the gospel to these Jewish people who would respect that.

And it is interesting that Paul did not circumcise Titus in Galatians 2:3 because he was a pure Gentile. He had no Jewish blood. Had he done so, he would have violated the decrees of the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 and acquiesced to Jewish Legalism and so forth.

So the reason he did it to Timothy is he is saying, basically, “Look, Timothy, I want you to be able to express your Christianity, express your faith as a Jew. Yes, you have a Jewish mother, therefore, in the eyes of the Jews you are a Jew. So being circumcised is

²⁰ Romans 4:11.

²¹ Ibid.

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not going to offend the Gentiles, but it might some of the Jews. So given your heritage, let's do this.”

But that sign not only pointed, the sign of circumcision not only pointed to the physical lineage of the Jew, but also it was a sign that pointed to the whole issue of guilt, of a sinner's guilt.

You see, the cutting away of the male foreskin was a surgical procedure that literally helped protect against the spread of disease. Therefore, it also dramatically symbolized a need of a deep cleansing. It symbolized the excision of the guilt and the corruption of sin that could only occur through justification.

Think about it. Because it is through the seed of the male that the depraved, I am sorry, the depraved nature is passed on, it is fitting, therefore, that this cleansing would take place symbolically with that organ. And that was part of this great, of this great sign that God gave them.

And ultimately it pointed to a day when through the seed of Abraham the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ would one day come and wash away, cleans completely all of the sins of those who place their trust in him.

What an amazing picture of the lamb that would be the promised seed of the Abrahamic covenant through whom all of the families of the earth shall be blessed.

But notice also in verse 11 circumcision was not just a sign that pointed to their ethnicity as God's covenant people and the need for this deep spiritual cleansing. But it was also, he says, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.

You Jews what to know what circumcision is all about? Here is what it is all about. It wasn't about being declared righteous. It was a sign, but also a seal.

Now what does a seal do? Well, a seal guarantees something. We have seen a seal of approval on various items that we might buy. A seal certifies the authenticity of something. And here the idea is circumcision served as a seal certifying the trustworthiness of God's promise to Abraham that because of his faith God would indeed reckon or impute unto him the righteousness of God. That is what he says here, “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.”²²

So the emphasis here is upon his righteousness, a righteousness available through faith, not through circumcision. The issue was always their heart, not some act, some outward work that merely involved the body.

²² Romans 4:11.

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For example, Deuteronomy 30 and verse six, Moses said, “Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.”²³

And so, again, it was not the act of circumcision that obligated God to declare Abraham righteous, but it was his confidence in a merciful, loving, forgiving God that was the channel through which God justified him and every man who has ever believed in him thereafter.

Paul has already stated in Romans two verse 28:

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.²⁴

We read the same concept in Jeremiah chapter four verses three through four. Here God speaks through his prophet. He says:

For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem, "Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns. "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD And remove the foreskins of your heart, Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Lest My wrath go forth like fire And burn with none to quench it, Because of the evil of your deeds."²⁵

He went on to say in chapter nine verse 26 where he warns about the judgment that he is going to bring upon ungodly Israel. He speaks of them and says that you are: “all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart.”²⁶

They had a heart that was in need of cleaning. Therefore, according to Mosaic law on the eighth day after a male child was born he would be circumcised according to Genesis 17 verse 12, a sign reminding them of God’s covenant, reminding them of their need for this spiritual cleansing and also a seal certifying God’s promise to justify the ungodly by grace through faith.

So, the Jews will ask, “Well, if Abraham did not receive his righteousness on the basis of his circumcision, then what was it designed to accomplish?”

That is the answer here as we see in verse 11.

²³ Deuteronomy 30:6.

²⁴ Romans 2:28-29.

²⁵ Jeremiah 4:3-4.

²⁶ Jeremiah 9:26.

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“He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised [referring to Gentile believers], that righteousness might be reckoned to them.”²⁷

And then verse 12.

“And the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision [referring to believing Jews], but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.”²⁸

All of that to say simply this. Racially Abraham was the father of the Jews. Spiritually, Abraham was the father of all of the Jews and Gentiles who believe. That is the point.

Now, some of you might say, “I am glad we are getting through all of this and I am glad we don’t have to deal with any of this stuff today.”

Maybe not with respect to the specific issue of circumcision, but we deal with it all the time with respect to a variation of this same issue, with respect to the issue of how does God justify the ungodly?

Many people believe that there is some religious ceremony or some behavior that if they do a certain thing it will obligate God to justify them, to declare them righteous. I have given you the example already of millions of people in the Eastern Orthodox Church, one of which would be the division of the Russian Orthodox Church, but Roman Catholics claim Christ as their Savior yet they teach justification by grace plus works just like the Russian Orthodox, that it is made effective through the mediation of the Catholic priesthood.

For them the first step is baptism. According to Rome salvation begins with baptism. It begins with infant baptism for those that are born into Catholic homes. Or if you come along later, then it is adult baptism. According to Vatican II, a decree on ecumenism, they say this.

Quote, “By the sacrament of baptism, whenever it is properly conferred in the way the Lord determined and received with the proper dispositions of soul, man becomes truly incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ and is reborn to a sharing of the divine life,” end quote.

Another Roman Catholic authority says this.

Quote, “Baptism is a true sacrament instituted by Christ. It is administered by washing with natural water and at the same time invoking the most holy trinity. Anybody, even an

²⁷ Romans 4:11.

²⁸ Romans 4:12.

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unbeliever or a heretic can validly administer baptism. Since it confers grace by the signs being properly carried out, children can and should be baptized even while still infants. Baptism is necessary for salvation. Baptism effects the remission of original sin and actual sins and of all punishment due to sin. It confers sanctifying grace, membership in Christ and in the Church and the obligation to obey the church's laws and give an indelible character.”

And one footnote from—I love this name—Pope Innocent III in AD 1201 said that, “Baptism of young children is not profitless as circumcision made men members of the people of Israel, so baptism gives them entry to the kingdom of heaven,” end quote.

And, of course, for them the next step after baptism is going on with the church sacraments. The seven sacraments are, first, baptism, then you have penance or reconciliation and then the eucharist which is the mass that supposedly unites people, unites a person to Christ with the wine and the bread preserves and increases that supernatural life of the soul according to the Roman Catholic. And then there is the sacrament of confirmation and then of matrimony, of holy orders and then of the anointing of the sick.

According to L G Lubbeson in his book *The Eucharist in Catholic Life* he says this, quote, “The seven sacraments are the necessary means established by Christ through which his redeeming, life giving, sanctifying grace is imparted to individual souls. You must center your life upon the sacraments established by Christ if you want to save your soul.”

He goes on to say, “The sacraments are the source of your real life, the divine life that will unite you with God in this world and in eternity. Let nothing make you think that you can get along without the sacraments. Without them your soul must die. If you don't receive the sacraments at all, you don't receive grace. If you don't receive them properly, that is, if you receive them seldom and with little devotion, you receive less grace,” end quote.

And, sadly, all of this was set in stone in the mid 16th century at the Council of Trent. And there the great officials of the Catholic Church concluded this.

Quote, “If anyone denies that by grace of our Lord Jesus Christ which is to be conferred in baptism the guilt of original sin is remitted or even asserts that the whole of that which has the true and proper nature of sin is not taken away, let him be anathema.” In other words, let him be cursed.

So that means that you believe what I am teaching you, what I believe the apostle Paul is teaching us through his Word, then we are not only without grace, we are cursed.

Well, similarly, there are many Protestant groups that hold to similar kinds of superstitions, especially with respect to baptism. Many Christian groups believe that the

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act of baptism is what saves a person, that that is what immerses a person into the new covenant completely apart from repentance and faith and God's grace alone. Some protestant churches agree with the Roman Catholic Church and believe that infant baptism corresponds with circumcision of the circumcision of Jewish male infants. While many of them will not believe that it actually saves them, they would say that it places them into the covenant family of God and therefore it raises the probability that they will be saved and so forth.

And while many well meaning Christians will agree that God justifies the ungodly by grace alone through faith alone, they will insist either publicly or privately that certain preferences that they hold dear are necessary to be pleasing to God as if the imputed righteousness of Christ were not enough. So they try to force their preferences onto other people. And the list of those is myriad. Romans 14 and 15 is where Paul would deal with that variation.

So Paul is going to great lengths here to try to demonstrate the real issue which is simply this. God justifies the ungodly solely by grace through faith, period. Sinners must be clothed in the righteousness of Christ in order to be declared righteous. We don't have to come along and add something to that as if the righteousness of Christ were not enough.

So keep the big picture here. Paul is arguing here. How did Abraham receive his righteousness? Not by works of the flesh. It was through faith in God. It is not by circumcision and, fourth and finally this morning, it is not by the law. That is verses 13 through 17.

You see, he knows that they are also going to ask the question, not only: How did Abraham receive his righteousness, but ok, well, how did he receive his inheritance? Wasn't that by keeping the law?

No, it was by grace through faith. Notice verse 13.

“For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.”²⁹

This promise that Abraham and his descendants would be heir of the world is a reference, once again, to the covenant that God gave to Abraham. He introduced it in Genesis 12. It was actually made and then later on in Genesis 15 and it was finally reaffirmed in Genesis 17. And remember all of that covenant included basically four things.

Let me remind you of them, because this is what is paramount in the Jewish thinking and where Paul is going with this. They are saying, “Ok, now wait a minute. God promised that he would have a seed.” And we know that ultimately that seed referred to Christ who would be both the Redeemer and the King.

²⁹ Romans 4:13.

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For example, Paul is going to explain this in Galatians 3:16. There he says, “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ.”³⁰

So that seed is ultimately going to refer to Christ.

Then later in verse 29 of Galatians three he went on to add, “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”³¹

And, boy, with that we could all say amen, right? Hallelujah. We are all heirs according to promise. We are all fellow heirs with Christ, right? Romans 8:17. What a wonderful truth.

Now, what God promised Abraham with respect to that seed referring to Christ has partially been fulfilled. He has already come as Redeemer, but he hasn’t yet come as King. But he will. He is also in that... he also promised land to Abraham, a specific territory where God would place his people, where they would be set apart unto him, a place where he would one day dwell with them and in a holy and intimate union.

Today we see Israel as God’s beloved enemy. They are still heirs of those promises and we watch them struggle against the whole world. It seems like the United States is now joining with them struggling against the whole world to retain, dear friends, just a fraction of the land that God promised them.

But we see God protecting them even though they are still his beloved enemy because he knows that some day he is going to fulfill that promise and he is going to reconcile a remnant back unto himself. And we await that day and he is going to do that when he returns as the promised Messiah King and then the land will be theirs.

He also promised Abraham a nation, a place where... or a group of people in a nation, I should say, where Abraham’s godly reputation and his legacy would be displayed materially. It would be displayed socially. It would be displayed spiritually and then the glory of God’s grace would be put on display.

And he also promised him a divine blessing of protection. Remember, I mentioned that last week, Genesis 12:3.

“I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”³²

³⁰ Galatians 3:16.

³¹ Galatians 3:29.

³² Genesis 12:3.

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Well, you see, the Jews appropriately looked forward to all of this and they still do today. These blessings have been partially fulfilled in Christ and his Church whereby the world enjoys the blessings that God has lavished upon his own. In fact, the United States has been the blessing of the whole world. It has been this grand country that was largely founded upon and governed by the values of the reformation.

Now we see all of that quickly evaporating, but we can see how the whole world has been blessed through these promises to Abraham. But that is nothing compared to the blessing that will one day come when the Prince of Peace, the Lord Jesus Christ comes and establishes his glorious kingdom.

Now the question is simply this. On what basis did Abraham receive the promise of this inheritance? Is it on the basis of law or grace?

Verse 13 he says, “Not through law, not through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.”

Again, justification is not by circumcision nor by obeying the law. God had never even required circumcision until Abraham was declared righteous, nor had the law even been revealed by this time. So it can't be that.

Verse 14.

For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation.³³

What is he saying there? It is really quite simple. It is almost comical. He is saying, “If these promises of our inheritance were contingent upon all of us keeping the law perfectly, then the promise would never be fulfilled.” Why? Because we can't keep the law. The law cannot save. All it brings about is wrath.

But he says, “But where there is no law,”³⁴ meaning where law has been satisfied by grace, where grace is now offered so that we can now stand before a holy God clothed in the righteousness of Christ that has been imputed to us, when that happens he says, “Neither is there violation.”³⁵

I love that.

You see, therein is the confidence of how God's promises are going to be fulfilled. Not on the basis of what we do, but on the basis of what Christ has done.

³³ Romans 4:14-15.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

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And then Paul offers this magnificent summary in verse 16.

“For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace.”³⁶

Isn't that great? In other words, it is because of God's sovereign grace that a man believes in God. It is grace that has paved the way for salvation and faith which some have called the hand of the heart that is also a gift from God that reaches out and accepts this gift of grace.

And he goes on to say, “In order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law,”³⁷ in other words, not just to the Jews, “but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham.”³⁸ Boy, that is all who believe, regardless of their racial or their religious background, all who believe “who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.”³⁹

Verse 17.

“As it is written, ‘A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU’”⁴⁰

He is quoting from Genesis 17:5.

“In he sight of Him whom he believed, even God.”⁴¹

Now which God is this? I love the way he closes.

The one “who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist,”⁴² referring to the Creator God.

Oh, what a magnificent promise, amen? What a magnificent... our salvation is on the basis of God's grace, not on our works. And because of that we know that the promises will be realized. It is all a matter of grace. And therefore we can say with Peter if we have an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled, will not fade away, reserved in heaven for us, he goes on to say that we are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice.

Dear friends, I hope this gives you comfort, all you that know Christ. It does me. Won't you give God the glory this week as you contemplate these incredible truths as you worship the Lord privately as well as in your public profession of faith? And then

³⁶ Romans 4:16.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Romans 4:17.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid

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people will hear your life sing the words that an anonymous author penned based on Psalm 89.

I sing of mercies that endure,
Forever builded firm and sure,
A faithfulness that never dies,
Established, changeless in the skies.

And, dear friend, if you do not know Christ I would plead with you as a minister of the gospel that today you examine your heart before the Lord, that you acknowledge your sin before him, that you cry out for forgiveness that he will so willingly give you and then you, too, will be justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these eternal truths. In many ways they are complicated to us because the culture is so ancient and yet, Lord, the principles are so practical and so relevant even to this day. The bottom line, Lord, we thank you that you will declare a man righteous if he places his faith in your saving grace. Lord, we rejoice in that. We pray that that truth will impact every person that is within the sound of my voice today for the glory of Christ for it is in his name that I pray. Amen.

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