

To the One Who Does Not Work

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[0 : 00] Let's take a seat and open your Bibles up to Romans chapter 4.

We took a week off of our journey through Romans last week to celebrate Reformation Sunday, and now this week we are back in the book of Romans. And finally making it to chapter 4, where this morning we are going to cover Romans chapter 4, verses 1 through 8.

Now if you didn't bring your Bible with you, if you have one of the Bibles that are in the chairs, scattered out in the chairs there, it is actually on page 941, if you want to find it in those Bibles, 941. But Romans chapter 4, I want to ask you guys to stand with me as we read God's Word together.

The Apostle Paul writes, Father, we thank you that you, by your Spirit, inspired Paul to write these words.

And we pray that that same Holy Spirit would give us wisdom and insight from these words this morning. We ask in Christ's name. Amen. You guys can take a seat.

[2 : 00] Most of us can probably, most of you can probably remember your first job. The first thing that you did was not a chore that your parents had given you, but a job actually working for someone else where you actually got paid.

I remember my first job was at People's Building Center. And for those of you who don't know Dayton very well, it's not far away from us, but 20 minutes down the road there's Dayton. And People's Building Center is sort of the local hardware store there, the home hardware store.

Not like Lowe's, not like Home Depot, but actually owned by people that I knew that my dad grew up with, and his dad grew up with their parents, and so it's been there for a long time. And my first job was to work in what was called sort of the inside warehouse.

It was attached to the store, but it's where they kept the plywood and a lot of the supplies. And my job was just to load things in people's trucks and trailers and to sign off on their tickets. That was my first sort of real job.

I don't think that it was a necessary job, though, because it wasn't as if when they hired me for the summer I was replacing someone who left, and they didn't actually replace me when I left, so I don't think it was a necessary job that I was doing, but it was a job and I got a real paycheck.

[3 : 07] It was a measly little paycheck, but it was real. I mean, they had taken taxes out of it and everything. It was a real paycheck just for loading plywood and 2x4s in the backs of people's trucks.

It just seemed pretty easy to me and was exciting to me to actually have what, in my mind, constituted a real job. And the Bible talks a lot about work.

The Bible talks a lot about us doing our best and putting in our most effort and the value of work. In fact, the Apostle Paul says that in regards to those who are able-bodied, that those who do not work ought not to eat.

And so the Bible places a high premium on work, on effort, on us giving it our all. I mean, we talk about the Protestant work ethic, this idea that we should all work hard, we should all labor, labor, we should all put in our energy into labor, and then we should be able to expect in return a fair payment for that.

That doesn't mean that everybody gets paid the same, because some people have more valuable skills, or some people do work that involves more training beforehand, and so we're not all paid the same. But we are expected from the Bible, we're expected to work hard, to do our best, and then receive some sort of compensation in return.

[4 : 17] Which is why when you turn to Romans, particularly in chapter 3, and now here in the opening of chapter 4, and you hear the Apostle Paul encouraging us not to work, it might sound strange initially to your ears.

In fact, I want you to take a look, because the central verses in this chapter, in Romans chapter 4, are verses 4 and 5. It's the summary of what Paul wants to tell us in this entire chapter.

Notice what he says there, beginning in verse 4. He says, 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.

So now there's a kind of not working, that actually results in a reward. And in fact, the greatest reward of all, greater than any paycheck you could ever imagine, because this reward is the free gift of righteousness, counted as if it were actually yours.

This is good news. This is gospel. But it does sound a bit strange, if you're not familiar with it. Paul is essentially saying here, that those who do not work, those who do not put in the effort to try to earn righteousness, to try to earn God's approval, but instead they simply believe.

[5 : 42] They just trust in God's promises. They will receive righteousness. But the ones who work for it, the ones who put in all the effort for it, they will only get exactly what is owed to them, which is bad news.

Because what is owed to us as sinners, no matter what we might do, no matter how many good works we might pile up in this life, what is owed to us as sinners is wrath, is punishment, everlasting punishment.

When Paul says, now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, or his wages are not counted according to grace, but they are counted to what is due, or counted towards what is owed, toward the debt, that's not good news for us.

It's as if you owed someone a billion dollars. Imagine owing someone a billion dollars. I can't even imagine that. I can't even get that in my mind.

But if you owed someone a billion dollars, and you went to this person, and you decided that you were going to work in their garden to pay it off. You work every day in their garden.

[6 : 54] You'll do a good job. You'll do the best job that you can. You'll make sure that they always have beautiful flowers. You make sure that it's always mulched. You'll make sure that it's weeded and taken care of. How long would you have to do gardening work in order to pay back a billion dollars?

Forever, I guess. I don't know. It would take so long. It's a hopeless, fruitless task. And that's the task that faces those who try to earn themselves into God's kingdom, who try to work themselves to God's approval.

You can't do it. It cannot be done. You owe a debt to God that cannot possibly be paid. And to attempt to work to pay it off is to consign yourself to punishment.

There's no escape route this way. There's no way to avoid you paying what you owe. Because if God paid you everything that you ever earned, you would still owe an infinite amount back to Him.

You would still deserve punishment at the end of it all. And that's what Paul is saying. If you try to earn it, if you try to work to earn God's approval and God's favor, He'll give you what you deserve.

[8 : 02] He won't give you grace. He'll give you what's owed to you. And if you're a sinner, and I'm a sinner, and you're a sinner, that's very, very bad news.

But, on the other hand, He says, but if you don't work, if you choose not to try to earn it, but instead you simply trust, then you get everything that you need.

Righteousness. Full, complete obedience to God's will and God's word. Count it as yours, as if you had actually done it. All of this is actually elaboration on what Paul said at the end of chapter 3.

Take a look back up at chapter 3, where I told you a couple of weeks ago that verse 28 in chapter 3 really is a summary of what Paul's been trying to say. It really is his main point sort of boiled down to a single statement, a single sentence, where he says, we hold that one is justified, that is declared to be righteous.

We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. You get righteousness in God's sight by faith without works of the law.

[9 : 16] See, there are only three options for obtaining a right standing before God. There's three options before us. You have the attempt to earn righteousness by obedience to the law.

You have works by itself, which will not work because you can't do enough works. And then you have the option of, well, let me attempt to believe, I will believe God's promises, but I will also add to that my own good works to sort of fill in the gaps left.

You have that option, which will not work because God's promises are that He will save you apart from your work so that if you think that you need to add your work to it, you're not actually believing in the promises.

You've twisted the promises around to where the promises are, I will save you, I will deliver you, I will rescue you, I will count you to be righteous if you believe this promise and you add a little to it, which is not what the promise actually says at all.

So Paul says, we hold, we believe that a man is justified by faith without any works of the law. That's option number three. You can try works alone, you can try works plus faith, or you can try faith all by itself, faith alone.

[10 : 33] And Paul says, that's the only thing that will work. It's the only thing that will do because God counts the one who does not work, but simply believes.

God credits righteousness to that one, not the one who believes and works in order to augment their faith. That's not the way that it works. Faith alone, without any addition to it, for the sake of a right standing before God, will count.

Faith plus anything else will not count. And Paul in chapter 4, in these opening verses, is going to marshal two Old Testament passages in order to prove that point.

He's elaborating on Romans 3, 28 here, in verses 4 and 5, and before verses 4 and 5, in 1, 2 and 3, he's going to appeal to the book of Genesis, in particular to Abraham.

And then, in verses 6, 7 and 8, he's going to appeal to David. You couldn't pick two better people from the Old Testament to use to prove your point.

[11 : 40] Paul couldn't have done any better. You go with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. And if you look in ancient Jewish writings outside of the Old Testament, if you look in the writings of some of the earliest rabbis, one of the things that you'll see and notice very quickly is that they had a high esteem for Abraham.

And they had a high esteem for Abraham because they counted Abraham as someone who was fully obedient to God. They counted Abraham as someone who was a very righteous man, who in fact could not be matched in righteousness by anyone else in the Bible.

That's how they thought of Abraham. And so if they went to anywhere in the Hebrew Bible, if they would go anywhere to prove their case that good works are necessary, they would go to Abraham and they would list out all of Abraham's good works and they would say, see, the father of us all, the father of the Jewish nation itself, was a man of great good works.

And those good works, they would argue, earned God's approval and favor. And so Paul must counter that very Jewish understanding of Abraham and the book of Genesis.

And then he also needs to appeal to David. David, the greatest king in the history of Israel. David, the one through whom they believe the Messiah will come. And so at the end of this paragraph, he turns to David and he quotes from one of the Psalms, Psalm 32, that David himself wrote in order to add emphasis to his case.

[13 : 10] So let's look first at what Paul says about Abraham by way of proving the statement, a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law and God counts those who don't work but believe instead of working to be righteous.

That's what he's going to prove in the first three verses of this passage by appealing to Abraham. So look at these verses. He asks the basic question in response to all that he said in chapter 3, justification by faith apart from works of the law, then what shall we say, literally it's translated, what shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to flesh, what did he find?

What did Abraham find? What did Abraham discover? What was found by Abraham? And then he makes a statement. Verse 2.

If Abraham was justified by works, and that's the basic view of who Abraham is among the Jewish people of Paul's day, if that's true, Paul says, if Abraham was justified by works, then he has something to boast about.

That's common sense. If Abraham on judgment day can stand before God and say, I deserve to be granted entrance into your kingdom because I have done all of these things, and if God says, yes, Abraham, that's a long enough list.

[14 : 32] Yes, Abraham, you've done enough. Yes, you've been exemplary. You deserve to enter into my kingdom. Then Abraham has a reason to brag. Abraham gets to boast.

I did all that. I earned my way into God's kingdom. That's simple. That's basic. Paul just says, listen, if Abraham gains entrance by works, if Abraham is declared righteous by God because he earned it, because he is righteous, then he gets to boast about that.

He has something that he gets to brag about. And then he makes a statement that seems kind of strange, out of place even, the way that it's usually translated and punctuated in our English Bibles.

He says, if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. That sort of hangs out there. The first several times that I read this passage I thought, why did he even add that?

Because the argument flows much more smoothly if you leave it out. If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about. What does the Scripture say?

[15 : 37] That flows. And yet he inserts this statement in here, but not before God. It sounds as if initially Paul is saying, if Abraham earns his way, if he gets righteousness on the basis of his works, he gets to boast.

He just doesn't get to boast to God. He only gets to boast to other people. Which makes absolutely no sense, because what would Abraham be boasting about? Abraham would be boasting about his own triumph in the day of judgment.

Abraham would be boasting before God that he himself has earned his way in. So in what sense can Abraham, earning his way by works, result in boasting, and yet he cannot boast before God?

I think it's the way that it's punctuated that's confusing. Look in your Bible, in almost every English translation, every one that I checked at least, you just have a comma. Nothing more than a comma. Now obviously, in the original language of the New Testament, in Greek, there was no punctuation.

No periods, no commas, no semicolons, no question marks. There's no punctuation whatsoever in the ancient Greek. So when we translate things into English, translators have to make their best guess as to where English punctuation ought to go to approximate or to communicate the original meaning.

[16 : 53] Because our written language requires punctuation. punctuation. It matters where you put a comma in an English sentence, but there are no commas in ancient Greek. So we add them in to try to approximate or try to best communicate what the author was saying in Greek.

And occasionally, there are times when I think, I'm not sure that that punctuation helps us to see what Paul or whoever the writer was meant to communicate. And this is one of those instances where I don't think that a comma is necessarily helpful.

Because I don't think that Paul is in fact saying, if you earn your way into heaven, you get to boast, you just can't boast before God. I don't think that that's the point at all.

I think that if I were translating this, I might, I don't really know how to do it, I might put a big dash instead of a comma. Because I think what Paul was saying is if Abraham is able to earn, if he's able to be justified according to his works, by his works, then he gets to boast.

Pause. But you can't boast before God. He can't boast. Nobody, nobody gets to boast before God. For what does the Scripture say?

[18 : 04] And then he goes on to prove that statement. Abraham doesn't get to boast before God. Nobody gets to boast before God. No fallen sinful creature gets to boast before God. Why?

Because God counts faith as righteousness, not works. In fact, it's a theme that runs throughout the Scriptures. That God will not tolerate boasting in His presence.

He will not tolerate it. He will not allow it. When God delivers Israel from its various enemies, God makes sure that He does it over and over in such a way that Israel cannot boast and brag that they have delivered themselves.

Over and over we see that pattern throughout the Old Testament. In fact, let me show you one place where it happens where it's worded in a way that's really clear. Hold your place in Romans and turn back all the way back to the book of Joshua.

All the way back in your Old Testament to the book of Joshua chapter 7. Some of you might be familiar with the story of Gideon. Not Joshua, I'm sorry, Judges chapter 7. Some of you are familiar with the story of Gideon in the book of Judges.

[19 : 09] He's one of the judges that God raised up to deliver the people of Israel from their oppressive enemies all around them. The book of Judges actually records a very interesting pattern for us throughout the history of Israel.

Israel would slip into a pattern of disobedience. They would be tempted to follow the ways of the nations around them. At times, begin worshipping false idols. And God would raise up what He called a judge.

He would raise someone up who would oftentimes punish Israel for their sins. And then Israel would repent. And then God would then use that judge after they had repented to deliver them from their enemies.

And then the next generation would come along and sink into the same kind of span and the pattern would repeat itself over and over throughout Israel's history. One of these judges was a man named Gideon. And Gideon is well known because he was really a nobody.

He was not a trained military commander and yet he was chosen by God to lead an army against the Midianites. We find a record, though, of how God would use Gideon and Gideon's army to defeat these peoples in Judges chapter 7.

[20 : 21] So take a look there. I want you to just look in verse, we'll say verse 2. The Lord said to Gideon, The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand lest Israel boast over me saying, My own hand has saved me.

So Gideon has gathered an army of several thousand men and God looks at that army and says, Gideon, I think that army has got a shot.

There's enough of them. They might beat the Midianites. They've got a shot at it. So, it's too big. I need a hopeless army. One that cannot possibly win in this battle because if I send you with all these thousand men and you win the victory, you might boast over me and say that we have to limit ourselves by the strength and power of our own hand.

And God will not have that. God will not have us boasting that we have contributed to our own deliverance in any way whether that be physical deliverance here in Judges or whether it be spiritual deliverance discussed in Romans.

God will not have it. In fact, God whittles this army down to a mere three hundred men and He sends them to surround the camp of the Midianites not with swords, not with great weapons, but with pots and trumpets.

[21 : 42] It's not really what you want when you're going against several thousand people with three hundred men. And God causes confusion to come upon the Midianites and the Midianites kill themselves. How can Israel brag when they've done absolutely nothing?

We showed up with a pot or a pitcher and a trumpet and they all killed themselves for us. No boasting is allowed in that kind of event.

And that's routine for God. God routinely delivers Israel in ways that Israel would not be able to boast because God will not hear of us boasting that we have accomplished our own deliverance.

And that's not just a message for Old Testament Israel. That's not just God acting in one way the physical nation of Israel in the Old Testament. God continues under the New Covenant to save His New Covenant people in ways by which we can claim no credit of our own.

Let me give you an example from the New Testament. Turn over a few pages from Romans to 1 Corinthians chapter 1. It's the next book. Let's turn over to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 where Paul encourages the Corinthians to think about their salvation.

[22 : 56] Just think about it. He begins by saying consider your calling. Think about your calling. Verse 26 Consider your calling brothers. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards.

That's not much of a compliment. Not many of you were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. So they're not wise. They're fools. Alright? They're not powerful.

They're weak. And they're not even of any account in the society around them. They're nobodies. Verse 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world even the things that are not to bring to nothing things that are. And here's why.

Here's why this is the way that God chooses to save people. So that no human being might boast in the presence of God. No boasting is allowed.

[23 : 55] And then he goes on to say because of him because of his work because of his doing you are in Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God righteousness and sanctification and redemption so that as it is written let the one who boasts boast in the Lord not in themselves not in their own accomplishments.

Paul says God will not save you. God has not delivered you because of your own worthiness because of your own greatness because of your own power or your wisdom.

In fact God has delivered you and rescued you in such a way to make it clear that there are no grounds left for boasting. So we come to Romans chapter 4.

Paul says if Abraham is justified by God because of his works he has something to boast about. But let's be clear about this one thing.

Abraham does not will not and cannot boast before God which means already without the rest of this chapter already in the first three verses Paul has effectively cut off good works as a means of salvation because God will not allow the people he saves to boast in their own abilities.

[25 : 21] It will not happen. Now the scriptural proof that Paul has to offer in the next verse. Verse 3 For what does the scripture say?

And he quotes from Genesis chapter 15 Abraham believed. Abraham believed and God counted it to him for righteousness.

He believed. nothing else. Not Abraham believed and obeyed the law. Nothing else. Abraham believed and that faith itself was counted for righteousness.

That's it. Pure plain and simple. Now the rest of this chapter which we'll spend two or three weeks covering the rest of this chapter will tease out all the implications of that quotation from the Old Testament the fact that that quotation is given before Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and his offspring two whole chapters before the commandment for circumcision came the fact that Abraham received that commandment before the law was ever given through Moses the fact that this occurs when Abraham hasn't done anything worth boasting about before God Paul will tease out the implications of this quotation from Genesis chapter 15 throughout the rest of this chapter but for now it's enough for him simply to say notice Abraham what did Abraham find great Abraham you say that he was known as a righteous man and he's declared right before God on the basis of his works but what does the scripture actually say the scripture says Abraham was counted righteous not when he did things

Abraham was counted righteous because he believed in God's promise what kind of promise was it it's the promise of deliverance for all the nations through Abraham's offspring the same basic promise that we believe oh we have more information about this offspring through whom God would deliver the nations we know his name we know the means by which he went about accomplishing redemption but make no mistake Abraham the father of the Jewish people was saved in the same way that we are through faith and by faith in the same person in whom we trust the deliverer the Messiah the offspring of Abraham he's saved by the same promise in the same person and God works the same way today as he did in Abraham's day when it comes to justification only those who trust alone in the promises are justified and what happens the moment

[28 : 16] Abraham trusts righteousness is credited to him righteousness is credited to his account he's not righteous he hasn't done anything that would give him a right standing before God remember prior to chapter 12 of Genesis Abraham was just another pagan from Ur of the Chaldeans from Babylon he was nobody he was not special he was not even most likely worshipping the true God he was probably given the region from which his family came he was probably a moon worshipper there's nothing in Abraham that would cause God to go oh he's righteous nothing and now here Abraham just believes a promise about redemption for the nations through his offspring and because of that righteousness is credited to his account righteousness is counted to him which is one side of the coin when it comes to justification we talk about justification we talk about two things we primarily talk about in these terms righteousness being counted to you even though you're unrighteous but more than that happens because something has to be done about your unrighteousness it's one thing to count all of

Christ's obedience as yours but you still have the lifetime of your own disobedience to be dealt with and so Paul moves on in the last three verses of this paragraph to talk about the other side of the coin in justification look down verse six just as also David speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works so everything is still happening in the same way and now Psalm 32 written by David himself where David says blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven whose sins are covered blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin so there's two kinds of counting that happen in justification number one Christ's righteousness is counted as yours and number two your sin is not counted as yours we call that forgiveness you cannot have the hope of eternal life unless you have both righteousness credited to you and sin credited counted away from you you must have both and they're not two separate events they are two sides of the same coin notice how it's worded here by the apostle

Paul notice exactly what he says David speaks of the blessing to the one whom God counts righteousness this blessing belongs to those whom God counts righteous and then he goes on to talk about forgiveness because the two are inseparably connected you cannot have forgiveness without the counting of righteousness to your account and the counting of righteousness to your account will not avail you anything if your sin is still there it must be removed and God has done all that is necessary through Christ to make both of those things happen simultaneously when we trust in him alone his righteousness counted as ours our sin counted as his and punished on his cross and this is a great doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from any sort of works whatsoever this is the good news of the gospel and I plead with you to believe it it is your only hope you cannot believe part of this you cannot you cannot say

I believe in Jesus but I base my hope upon the fact that I have also done a lot of good things that will not work you must believe in these promises and this redeemer and your faith must be in him alone and you say but what of works where is it to which Paul will reply in chapter 6 works have nothing to do with your justification they do not contribute in any way and yet works will flow from those who have been justified by faith alone do you realize what a great gift this is do you realize the immeasurable amount of grace given to us so that simply through faith we might be delivered and rescued and have an everlasting hope that our sins would be washed away so then who are we since such great grace has been given to us who are we to withhold forgiveness from others

Jesus says that those who have been forgiven will forgive others it ought to be automatic for us because if all of our hope is rooted in grace who are we not to demonstrate grace to others and if we have been saved and delivered by faith alone and by grace in great measure who are we to withhold this only hope from others around us who are we to think this is for me and for those that I hold dear but I may not share it with those across the street or in the cubicle next to me this is grace and this kind of pure unadulterated grace should push us and move us out to acts of grace and kindness toward others but woe to us if we ever began to think that those acts of grace and kindness have any contribution at all to make to our standing before

[34 : 45] God to the one who works no grace is given he gets what he has earned but to the one who doesn't work but simply trusts in a God who justifies ungodly people faith itself counts for righteousness let's pray