

Gospel Illustrated

Roman 4:1-8

Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness

Introduction: Teachers know illustrations are powerful as they turn the abstract concept into a concrete reality. Examples of that reality playing out show us what is possible and that what is being taught matters in real life. It is one thing to share with your 15-year-old not to get discouraged when they do not make varsity in the sport they love and to keep working hard. It is another to tell them the story of **Michael Jordan**, arguably the greatest basketball player to ever live, who got cut from the varsity squad his sophomore year because he was too small and unskilled, turning it into motivation for greatness. It is one thing to tell someone not to get discouraged as they start out in business and life, to keep persevering and striving. It is quite another to point out **Walt Disney**, who got fired from one of his first animation jobs at the Kansas City Star for a lack of imagination and good ideas, and whose first company closed in bankruptcy in 1923. It's one thing to know that there is hope for a marriage that is struggling or is even separated, it is quite another to witness the re-marriage of a dear couple over 10 years ago, after being divorced for a time. It is one thing to know there is hope for *prodigal children*, it's another to cling to the parable of the **Prodigal Son** (Luke 15:11-32).

Paul was a master teacher. He not only implemented *repetition*, knowing that it is one of the best ways to retain information, but he used relevant *illustration* in order to clarify the concepts of the **gospel** that he was teaching. The gospel is both simple and complex, understood by children and wrestled with over a lifetime, and believed and lived out. The gospel is that which we know *declares us righteous*, receiving justification, and that continues to transform us into the likeness of Christ, called *sanctification*, and that will one day bring us into eternity to be with Christ forever, called *glorification*. The gospel is where we find unity with each other in a church and where we would find unity with those outside of this church. Our view of the gospel will either put the emphasis of life on ourselves, living in our guilt, shame, indifference, insecurity, anger, and lack of forgiveness or will live in the fullness of a transformed relationship with God in Christ, with the ability to actually *overcome* these things by the strength God provides.

The pivotal part of the gospel that Paul clarified was not just **faith**, since every religion and humanistic venture requires that, but it is the **place, definition, and role of faith in salvation**. If faith is a mere player on the team of salvation, it ceases to be a Biblical gospel. Paul spilled much ink to clarify **faith and the gospel** in the first three chapters of Romans, with these main points:

1. Every person, everywhere, for all time, stand **guilty in our sin** before a holy and righteous judge. We all fall short of His standard, cannot save ourselves through our trying to keep the Law or misplaced morality, but stand before Him with our mouth shut and accountable to Him
2. Since we cannot make ourselves righteous, the only way that God can restore people to a right relationship with Him without compromising His glory or righteousness was to provide a **worthy substitute**
3. That worthy substitute had to pay the price God required for the sin of the redeemed, which was His precious blood, shed on the cross.

4. The **blood Jesus shed** accomplished two sides of the same coin: *satisfied God's wrath* and *forgave our sin*.
5. When God **declared us righteous** because of this payment, He did it on the basis of **faith**, which was the instrument of receiving the **life, death, and resurrection** of Jesus. Faith was not simply *believing in something or everything*, but in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ on our behalf.
6. Declaring us righteous and forgiving our sin was both **legal and relational**, in that it provided the forensic path that we could be righteous before God even though we ARE NOT in and of ourselves, and that we can be restored to now glorify, obey, and live for Him, NOT to earn but to please, make much of, and revel in.

Why did Paul have to spend so much time clarifying? Simple. Because receiving the gospel by grace ALONE and faith ALONE through Christ ALONE is so foreign to our sinful nature that we either find ourselves wanting to contribute our part through *works* or we want to **boast** in our new nature. In other words, the twin sins of **selfishness and pride** are so strong in us that the gospel breaks the grip and practice of these two insidious evils over a lifetime. This requires us never getting too far from the simple and profound reality that we are **justified by faith alone**, never moving from the foot of the cross, and never away from Jesus, the *Author and Perfector* of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

Admittedly, the previous realities can seem confusing or a lot, so Paul gave **TWO CONCRETE examples** from the Old Testament in the form of **TWO** of the most well-known figures who would not only resonate with Paul's Jewish crowd but give clear gospel principles to all.

Gospel Illustrated in Abraham's Faith

*What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2 **For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.** 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was **counted** to him as righteousness." 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not **counted** as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is **counted** as righteousness*

If there was a contest to determine the GOAT in terms of righteousness and admiration in the Old Testament, **Abraham** would definitely be your first overall pick. In **Isaiah 41:8** God refers to him as His friend. God Himself lauded him in **Genesis 26:5**, "*And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, 5 because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.*" He was known for leaving his home, his family, and the idol worship of his ancestry (Joshua 24:2-3) to follow God's call to go to a place he'd never been. He showed bravery in rescuing his nephew Lot (Genesis 14), and immense faith in his willingness to sacrifice the son of promise, Isaac, on **Mt. Moriah**, the same place where the Temple would one day rest and where the veil was torn when Jesus finished His work on the cross (Genesis 22; Matt. 27:51 – we will come back to this last event in a little bit).

But Abraham was far from perfect, since he was still a man, meaning he was just like me and you in falling short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Twice in the book of Genesis, Abraham succumbed to fear and asked his wife Sarah to say she was his sister while they were in hostile lands, since she was beautiful and he thought the rulers would kill him and take her (Genesis 12:1-9; 20) It was only by God's grace and intervention that Sarah was not violated, but Abraham valued his life over her purity. He also had a stretch of time where he questioned how he could have kids, and instead of waiting on the LORD,

he took Sarah's maidservant **Hagar** as a wife and had **Ismael** as a son, which only complicated life afterward. This is not to bash Abraham, but it is recorded in the record for a reason.

By the time of Paul, Jewish writings had put such a positive spin on Abraham's life that he came off almost sinless. Sometimes that happens with time. We can forget the bad and sinful stuff of our loved ones (which is a blessing) and only focus on the good. Three *influential intertestamental books* took this view. **Jubilees 23:10** says, "*Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the LORD, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life.*" **1 Maccabees 2:52** says, "*Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?*" Finally, **Sirach 44:19** stated, "*Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory.*"¹ Though these writings were not authoritative like Scripture, they were written two centuries before Romans and reveal what many of Paul's day believed about Abraham. Paul knew this, as well as the propensity of the **human heart to boast in their own works**.

The question Paul poses about Abraham was simple based on the case he just had made about **justification being by faith**: *What did Abraham gain or what did HE find?* In other words, Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation as well as "*the father of us all*" (Rom. 4:16). Paul goes on to answer that question with **two principles from his life**:

1. **Abraham actually had no grounds of boasting either** - "*If Abraham WAS justified by works, he WOULD have something to boast about, but NOT before God*" – In other words, if justification was gained at all by works, Abraham would be first in line to boast, since he DID have a record of faithfulness in his life...but even the one at the front of the line would have NO grounds to boast before God. In verses 4-5, Paul points out that if you work for something, it no longer is *counted* as a gift. If I show up for work and do a day's labor, and my boss says, "thanks, here's a gift of a paycheck", you would throw up your hands in protest because you **earned it**. But if you show up for work and look at your account and you have money in there already from a day's work, that is a gift, especially if that means someone else worked for you. Faith is **counted as righteousness when the unjust who only have filthy rags to offer believe in Jesus**.
2. **"What does the Scripture say?"** – This simple statement is worthy of its own study and sermon. Far from trying to argue from his own logic (though the gospel IS logical) and personality (though the gospel DOES work in our personality), Paul stated that to truly prove his point, the Bible had to be studied. Folks, this is a phrase that should be at the tip of our tongue when we discuss anything, especially as it pertains to the gospel. *How should we vote? How should we discipline our kids? How do I lead my wife? Do I need to submit to my husband? What am I here for?* If each of these elicits, "*What does the Bible say*", we'd be like the lauded **Bereans** of Acts, who were lauded for their commitment to searching the Scripture:

Acts 17:11 "*Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so*"

We remember that the Scripture that was referenced was the Old Testament, which is absolutely useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). The way to grow in this is to **receive it** (we need intake) to do it **eagerly** (with joyful anticipation), and by **examination**, to make sure what we believe is ground in Biblical reality.

¹ Daniel Doriani, "Reformed Expository Commentary", p. 123.

What Paul quotes from the Law was a well-known passage from **Genesis 15:6**:

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

A few important clarifications that change everything:

- Abraham believed **before** he was circumcised – He would not receive this sign until Genesis 17, so that could NOT be the basis of his righteousness.
- Abraham **BELIEVED the promises of God** – In Genesis 12, Abram was told by God that he and his offspring would be great, and the whole world would be blessed through him, even though Abram was advanced in years and had no male offspring (12:1-3). But he did something amazing: *he left all, believing God even though what he was promised did not seem humanly possible*. By the time we get to Genesis 15, he was getting a bit anxious, wondering if *Eliezer of Damascus* was going to be the heir. It was here that God re-iterated His promise and said his offspring would be like the stars in the sky. It was at this promise that Abraham placed his faith and trust in the Lord. **What was the nature of this belief?** Tedd Tripp offered this explanation from historical theology:

*But what does it mean to have saving faith? Starting with Martin Luther and further explicated by Philip Melancthon and others who followed them, **Reformed theology** has traditionally used a threefold definition of faith as **notitia** (knowledge), **assensus** (intellectual assent – the same type the demons have), and **fiducia** (trust). Our major confessions of faith show this understanding. The Westminster Confession of Faith 14.2 maintains that **saving faith joins believing in God’s Word, accepting Christ’s claims, and “receiving and resting on Christ alone” for all that salvation provides.***

*The answer to question 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism — “**What is saving faith?**” — provides perhaps the clearest description of saving faith found in any confession: “**True faith is not only sure knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also firm confidence which the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits.**”²*

Think of faith like sitting on a chair. You can see the **chair**, believe that it is one, and that it will hold you up. But until you are willing to move and sit **ON** that chair, entrusting your life to that chair, you do not truly believe. That is why the Westminster Confession talks about **resting on Christ alone**. Resting in and trusting are synonymous. It is a personal, living trust and commitment to Christ for salvation. Simply believing Jesus exists and that He was good, or even a Savior, falls short of the Biblical call to faith/belief.

This actually helps us understand James’ argument in **James 2:21-24**:

*Was not Abraham our **father justified by works** when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “**Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness**”—and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that **a person is justified by works and not by faith alone***

² <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/childs-call-conversion-faith-christian-mark>

Does James contradict Paul?!?! Does the Bible have a contradiction? Are we justified by BOTH faith and works?!?! The seeming contradiction has tied many a Christian and theologian in knots, and even had Martin Luther ready to throw the book of James out of the canon! But when we examine it a bit closer, we not only see there is NO contradiction, but both fit together like a hand in a glove. There are three parts of the James passage that if we understand them, we see the fit clearly.

1. **Context** – Anytime we read Scripture we must read the context. Taking one verse out of the whole has led to bad theology, claiming wrong promises, and stripping the text of its purpose. James and Paul wrote to different audiences and purposes. Paul was writing to a group of believers clarifying that works are NOT added to righteousness in God justifying us, while James started this section with this verse:

James 2:14 *“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”*

His purpose, then, was to clarify that a *mere profession of faith is NOT enough to save*. Saying you believe without any transformation of your heart and yielding to Christ in repentance is *dead, worthless, and no different than the demons*.

2. **Timing or Sequence** – James points out Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, his only son of promise, on the altar at God’s command as *proof or validation* of his justification. Abraham was declared righteous by faith alone in Genesis 15, and it was not until Genesis 22 that he almost sacrificed his son. Genesis 22 was the fruit, not the root, of his justification
3. **The word “DECLARED RIGHTEOUS”** – James and Paul use the same Greek work “*dikaion*”, which again seems tricky, but words have meaning in context. A valid use of the word is to “declare righteous” but also means “*to be vindicated, to be or become shown to be right by providing justification or proof.*” In other words, James and Paul are talking about the same issue, but one majors on the root (declared righteous by faith) and James about the fruit produced.

Why does this matter? Because people have always been motivated to “say” they believe in Jesus, but some are unwilling to yield themselves completely to Him, holding back areas of control in their own life. They like Jesus. May even say they love Him. But until you turn from the path you were on and turn to Him completely, your heart, mind, and life will not change. But it is also true, that **saving faith IS sanctifying faith**, meaning there will be FRUIT produced in us, since we now have the Holy Spirit, the mind of Christ, and the Word of God. We will not only love God but also His commandments (1 John 5:2). We will hate our sin, willingly confessing and turning from it regularly. We will love Christ, seek to know Him, and abide in Him. We will seek to forgive and be restored to those who’ve sinned against us. We will have the fruit of the Spirit produced in and through us. This will continue to happen, more and more, as we forget what was behind, all our pithy works and put no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3, 7), knowing that HE WHO BEGAN A GOOD WORK in us will be faithful to complete it (Phil. 1:6).

Gospel Illustrated in David’s Faith

*just as David also speaks of the **blessing** of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:*

⁷ *“**Blessed** are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;*

⁸ ***blessed** is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”*

Paul brings David up to make the same point from a different perspective. Righteousness was COUNTED TO Abraham by faith apart from works, and sin was NOT counted against David through forgiveness by faith. Again, David was not only well known to Jewish and non-Jewish audiences, but was the greatest King they had, was a man after God's heart, and through whom God made an unconditional covenant with (2 Sam. 7), just as he had done with Abraham.

Psalm 32:1-2 is in focus here, a Psalm written by David AFTER his sin with Bathsheba, including lying, deceiving, and murder. David loved the LORD but still acted out egregious sin against God, which led to His confession and restoration. A few important things to point out:

- 1) Notice that three times the word "*blessed*" is used. Blessed has the idea of "happiness" and is the oft repeated phrase in the "Beatitudes" in Matthew 5. Far too often, I think, we think happiness and blessing are set in terms of physical blessing. "I was blessed with the new _____". It is true that we should give thanks and recognize the gift Giver in every blessing, but the Hebrew concept and NT usage of "blessing" have far more to do with **God's favor and the intimate relationship He has with His people**. In other words, the blessing is God! A full, restored, peaceful, unrestrained relationship where we taste and see that He is good (Psa. 34:8). Even the Beatitudes of the NT turn the world upside down, where we are happy in poverty and mourning when we have Him. This is why Aaron the priest blessed the people with these words:

Numbers 6:24-26 *"The LORD bless you and keep you;
²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

We are "happiest" when we are in a right relationship with the LORD, or at least we should be. David knew this when he said, "Restore to me the **joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit**" (Ps. 51:12). Joy and blessing were in God alone.

- 2) Notice that David acknowledged (confessed) his sin, and his sins were NOT COUNTED/CREDITED to his account. This is the idea of *expiation*, the forgiving of sin which rids us of the shame and guilt of sin. That is how and why David could move forward in life after his sin, NOT in pride, but in knowledge that though still sinful, His sin was not counted against him.

So what does this mean for us? It means that we are not only counted righteous by faith alone, but there will be fruit produced in us. It also means that even when we sin egregiously, our sins are forgiven, and literally not "counted" against us, not showing up on the ledger against us.

How should that affect us in terms of our view of God and others? Daniel Doriani had this to say:

*"Many disciples gladly received God's forgiveness, but chafe at the thought of forgiving others. Many claim they that they cannot forgive themselves for their sins. If you are a believer and prone to self-condemnation, consider this: **God knows your sin more fully than you do, yet He forgives you. Are you wiser than He? If God forgives us, we should forgive ourselves, and others.**"*

In his foundational book "*The Disciplines of Grace*", Jerry Bridges wrote this timeless line:

"Our worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace."