

## Romans Lesson 6 Articles

**4:1–3** Chapter 4 serves as clear proof that the principle of justification by faith apart from works of any kind was in fact the principle operative in the Old Testament. It was not some new doctrine Paul brought onto the scene. He asked his readers to consider what could be learned from the experience of Abraham, the great patriarch of the Jewish nation. What did he discover? The Jews of Jesus' day considered Abraham the primary example of justification by works. The apostle James could ask without fear of rebuttal, "Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?" (Jas 2:21). So, the claim that God accepts people on the basis of personal trust rather than adherence to the law seems to run counter to the principle in force with Abraham.

In vv. 2–3 Paul argued as follows. Let us assume for the moment that Abraham was declared righteous as the result of what he did. (Paul would have had no trouble convincing a Jewish reader of that!) In that case, he would have something to boast about. But that cannot be because we have already established that God's method of setting people right excludes all boasting (3:27). Abraham may have had something to boast about before others but certainly not "before God." Scripture says that "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." The quotation comes from Gen 15:6, a verse that Paul's Jewish contemporaries would assume supported an opposite conclusion. It was critical that Paul show that this proof text, far from establishing the importance of works for justification, actually proves the opposite when properly understood.

James employed the same verse to support what appears to be an opposite conclusion. After citing the Genesis text James added, "You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" (Jas 2:24). Context explains the apparent discrepancy. Paul wrote to those deeply influenced by the Jewish emphasis on observance of the law. They needed to learn that the righteousness of God can be received only through faith. James spoke to those who tended to forget that saving faith must of necessity express itself in action. For Paul, Abraham was credited with righteousness when he believed God's promise of an offspring. For James that faith was confirmed when Abraham offered his son on the altar. Paul was concerned with the basis for justification; James, with its practical expression in conduct.

**4:4–8** Paul was not necessarily speaking of Abraham in vv. 4–8. That alleviates the necessity of explaining in what sense it could be said that the patriarch did not work. The verses constitute a general statement that compares believing with working as the basis for justification. When people work, their wages come not as gifts but because they have earned them. The spiritual realm, however, is different. In this case those who do not work but believe are regarded by God as righteous. Rather than attempting to earn God's favor by meritorious deeds, they simply trust. They are accepted by God as righteous because of their faith. God is under no obligation to pronounce righteous those who would earn his favor by working. Righteousness is a gift. God freely gives it to those who believe. The disparity between legalism and grace is seen most clearly in the way God grants a right standing to people of faith.

Paul's designation of God as one who "justifies the wicked" would come as a shock to his Jewish readers. In Exod 23:7 God says, "I will not acquit the guilty," and in Prov 17:15 we learn that he "detests" the practice of acquitting the guilty when carried out by others (cf. Prov 24:24; Isa 5:23). The paradoxical phrase, however, is in keeping with the remarkable fact that a holy God accepts as righteous unholy people on the basis of absolutely nothing but faith. F. F. Bruce comments that God, who alone does great wonders, created the universe from nothing (1:19–20), calls the dead to life (4:17), and *justifies the ungodly*, "*the greatest of all his wonders.*"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mounce, R. H. (1995). *Romans* (Vol. 27, pp. 121–124). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.