

Romans 4 – It has always been faith not works!

Now I don't know what you made of Romans 4 when it was read, I think it's quite technical. So I want to give you two reasons why it's really worth understanding it for yourself – two reasons why this is important for you.

The first one is really simple, and that's those verses at the end which I just prayed about – this is written for us.

The second is a little more complicated, but it has to do with our natural inclinations, our hearts and the position they naturally fall back to.

Let me explain: If I asked you to think about your life. Consider your thoughts and actions. Are you good enough for God? Think about what you would say.

Now, you might have thought yes, or no, or some kind of answer which is between the two.

But the key question is this: How does that make you feel? How do you react?

You see the bible's answer is no, none of us are good enough (we had a few chapters at the start of the book of Romans continuously making that point, and if you want to ask me about it, please do come and ask afterwards).

But last week we saw God's solution to this problem, faith!

God, through faith in Jesus Christ, and because of the cross, gives us a perfect record(!) righteousness it's called, a perfect record which means we're completely acceptable to him.

It's great news. And it's a gift, so we have nothing to boast about. But, there's a problem.

Our hearts, our natural inclination, the position we fall back towards, is a position not of faith, but of works. What does that mean? That means: you and I, naturally try to earn our own acceptance, try to deserve God's approval.

We become obsessed with our works, what we do and achieve, because we think they give us status, significance and value. We even think that we deserve love because of them.

Let me try and ground this: We see it in the proud attitude of someone who won't be helped.

They won't ask for help, and they'll be awkward and difficult about how they related to you if they have to accept help. Why? Because *they think* their value depends on being able to do things, so having things done for them strips them of their value.

You probably know someone like that, and we all have something of that in us.

There are hints of it similarly in the person who finds all their value and sense of identity in their work. And you notice it either because they struggle so much with retirement or redundancy, or because they work too hard, neglecting their family.

Or the other way around, some people feel crushed by a sense of unworthiness because "they are not good enough". They haven't done enough! They never do enough!

For themselves, and they think, for others, and for God too. They feel unlovable, because they don't deserve approval and love from God because they're not good enough.

This keeps people in bed, on their sofas, in their houses. It makes people afraid to try – because in their minds, it's hugely important how well they do at everything, and in their minds they're not and won't be good enough.

I don't know exactly how it is for you, those are some examples, but for all of us, our works – what we do, is the default way we read our value, our importance – whether we're acceptable and whether we deserve love.

But not everything in life works that way – family is a good example of something God has given us which doesn't. (I'll never forget the look of surprise and scorn on a mother's face when I said to her “everything in life is like that for kids as they grow up, they learn they need to *earn* everything” and she said, “what about my love for my son? That's not earned!”) And God has given us family, as one of the ways he tries to teach us this. You see, God doesn't work that way, he never has. Of course he cares about what we do, very much.

But when it comes to relating to God, our acceptability, our **righteousness** (is the bible's word) (which means our perfect status and standing before him)

Well, it depends on our faith not our works, and always has done. And that's what our passage is about.

We're going to go through the passage and follow Paul's logic about how it's always been faith and not works, and then we'll learn a lesson about what our faith should look like.

So, firstly, **Faith and not works for Abraham v1-5**

If I asked someone, what big things do you know about the Jewish faith? They might say:

- They believe in the same God as the Christians
- It all started with Abraham
- And there are loads of rules, it's all about rule keeping.

And that wouldn't be a bad answer, that's right, God chose them and he gave them his law, his rules.

Now, the church in Rome, to whom Romans is written, had lots of Christians from a Jewish background, and lots from a Gentile background (non-Jewish). And you may remember me explaining, there had been some conflict, the Jews had to leave Rome, and when they came back the church had to deal with a certain amount of conflict!

There were disagreements – and it seems, one of them was about faith and works.

So Paul goes to Abraham, the hero of the Jewish faith, and says v3 “What does the scripture say” It says, right at the start of God's dealing with Abraham (Gen 15:6) “Abraham **believed** God and it was credited to him as righteousness”

Abraham had faith – he believed! It was faith, not works.

And it was his belief in God which meant he was credited with righteousness.

So imagine we each have an account with God, either righteous or unrighteous, either acceptable or not, Abraham's account was credited with righteousness, because he believed God. Credited there doesn't mean earned – it is a gift, God treats him as if he were righteous, but he's not.

V4 says – if he had worked for it, if Abraham had done good works for his righteousness, well then he'd have earned it: And the verse would say earned as a right, or deserved, but it doesn't, it says credited – to mean a gift not earned.

Abraham was righteous by faith, not by works.

And as if that wasn't enough, it's **Faith and not works for David v6-8**

If Abraham was the great father of the faith, David was the great King – in fact, when Matthew starts his gospel, Writing to Jewish people about Jesus – the most exciting possible introduction he can give is his first verse: Let me tell you about Jesus Christ, descended from David, descended from Abraham!

And in v6-8 we see that it was faith and not works for David too.

Look down at v6 “David says the same thing when he speaks of the **blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:** [and these are David's words:]

⁷ “**Blessed** are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

⁸ **Blessed** is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.”

And Paul is saying, why does David say blessed?

What would he say if it was works?

“**Well done** to those who's sins are forgiven” what a great achievement.

“**Congratulations** to those who's transgressions are wiped away”

You've earned it, congratulations, what an achievement!

But no(!) David says **blessed**, and what does that mean, well you're lucky and fortunate to have been given something wonderful.

If God doesn't count your sin against you – you are blessed.

If God counts you as righteous, if he credits you with righteousness, then you are blessed.

David doesn't say “Fantastic is the person who earns this”

For David, it's a gift of God, again, like Abraham, it's faith not works.

And you might be starting to think – well yea, is really clear, why is this even an issue – but it was an issue for them (for the Jews) and it is for us too.

And perhaps it feels a little more personal, when in v9-11 we see

It's faith not works (including works) of religious observance! v9-11

And the religious observance here is circumcision.

Circumcision is a Jewish act of religious observance, it was a physical sign of being a Jew, much like baptism is an outward sign of becoming a Christian.

Abraham, the father of their faith was the first one who was circumcised, God told him to do it as a sign. And it was really important to the Jews, they even called themselves “the circumcised”.

We might think of, ‘the church goers’, or ‘the servers’, or the cleaning rota – All good things, done for God. We might even think of acts of religious service we each do in other ways. Perhaps reading the bible in the morning, or making time for prayer, or giving money to church and charity.

And here's where this really does make a difference to us: We mustn't make the mistake of thinking that God thinks well of us **because** of the religious things we do. (that would be works!)

Look at v9, Paul asks: ⁹ Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was **credited** to him as righteousness ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited?

Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It wasn't after, but before!

¹¹ And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith **while he was still uncircumcised.**"

Do you see his point? Abraham was righteous (by faith) before he was circumcised. It can't be important in order to be righteous – because there was a time when Abraham, the great father of the faith, was righteous, but not circumcised!

Like a Christian being acceptable to God, by faith, before they've made a habit of daily bible reading. Or before they've joined the cleaning rota.

You're not acceptable *because* you do those things – you were acceptable before you even did them!

Or more importantly, our example to follow **Abraham**, the great father of the faith, was righteous **before** he kept this religious observance! So it can't be a necessary requirement. And so to this church with a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers, he says Abraham can be father to all of you.

Those **uncircumcised** who believe just like Abraham did – AND - Those circumcised (as Abraham was later) who also believe, and have faith in the same way Abraham did.

Always faith, not works, and specifically – not religious observance!

Just like the thief on the cross next to Jesus, faith but no works, he wasn't baptised, he never had communion, he never went to bible study or home group – but Jesus declared him righteous, by his faith!

We need to learn that, it is faith and not works – not religious observance!

Now, just before we learn what our faith should look like.

I want us to spend a moment thinking about the consequences of this.

You know that phrase – "be careful what you wish for". I think that's a pretty appropriate phrase for us when it comes to faith and works. We said our hearts naturally try to earn our status before God and others.

This is a message particularly to the people who find it really hard to accept a gift from God, who are so attached to achievement and excellence, that they'd almost rather it was by works! They'd almost rather God did let them try to prove themselves to him, earn his love, secure their own status.

(v13-15) **What if it was by works?** (which it's not)

Well, the answer is, we'd be in big trouble!

Paul says, if it was (v14) **then faith means nothing(!) the promise of God is worthless – and the law [simply] brings wrath"**

If that's you, be careful what you wish for, if it was by works, we'd be under God's wrath.

But as it is, because it's not our works, but by faith in him,
"God's promise is fulfilled, it's by grace, and it's guaranteed!" (v16)

Be careful what you wish for! God's way: Faith, gives us a certain guarantee, even if we mess up! Because it depends on him. I wouldn't have it any other way, would you?

So that's it, his argument that we are made righteous by faith and not by works, just as it's always been with God – right from Abraham, with David, despite any religious observance, it's faith and not works.

So what about us?

We'll look at v23

"The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone,²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—
for us who believe in him, [God] who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

Now, we're not the Romans, who Paul wrote this letter to.

But what he's saying is, these words were written for everyone who came after Abraham! You too can be credited with righteousness, just like Abraham was, because of your faith not your works. So **have faith like Abraham.**

And having faith like Abraham, means a transfer of trust, taking our trust off our works, and onto God: Faith not works.

I said at the start we would learn what our faith should be like, and Abraham's faith wasn't just a faith "that God exists".

I think when people hear that I have faith, they think that means "I believe there is a God"
But Abraham's faith was much more than that.

He didn't trust in himself, but trusted God V16 (on the screen)

"he is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed

The God who gives life to the dead, And calls into being things that were not"

That is the kind of faith Abraham had, and we are to have too.

You see, Abraham didn't just believe God exists.

God made him a promise, that he'd have a son, and many descendants.

But Abraham was an old man, and his wife was an old woman, and they had no children!

v19 says, "Abraham was as good as dead, and Sarah's womb, was dead."

Why describe him like that? Not because Paul's happy to be rude about older people! But because Abraham believed in a God who could bring life to the dead – and could call into being things that were not.

He believed that God could bring life and give him a child, Just as He promised.

That's the kind of faith we should have – in a God who can bring life from death. Who can bring huge change! He can call into being things which are not.

God can bring new life to an almost dead old couple – Abraham and Sarah, and he did, giving them a son.

God can bring something from nothing, and he did – when he created the world in the very beginning, bringing it into existence.

God can bring life from death, and he did, bringing Jesus Christ back from the dead, raising him to life again after 3 days.

Do you believe that? Do you believe in a God who gives life to the dead?

Do you believe he can do that for you one day? (and bring you to heaven?)

God can call things that are not, into being:

God can give you a righteous status, credit you with being acceptable – bless you, even though your works can't earn it for you. He can call into being things that are not: including your righteousness.

Do you believe that? Do you believe in a God who can save people by calling into being things that are not?

Is that where your trust is? Or do you trust in yourself, that's where we naturally lean, it feels safe to rely on ourselves, and our own works.

But this is the faith we are called to have.

If we believe God is like this, then like Abraham: it won't be about what we can do, but we'll put our trust in God, and not in our works.

Do you think you *matter*, because of the things you do? Or how well you do them? Or how often? Faith in God involves a transfer of trust.

This passage makes it really clear that it was **always** faith not works. Yet the Jews slipped into trusting in their works. Why? Because they were human. And we all do that.

But this is a call for us, away from works, to faith in God and to trusting him not ourselves.

If we have that attitude in our lives, "trusting in God and living by faith", then when we stand before God, if he were to ask us why he should let us in to his heaven, we wouldn't say:

"because I've been a good boy" we wouldn't say "I've tried my best to be a good Christian".

Those would be answers all about us, about works.

We would say, with v25 "Because **Jesus** died for my sin and was raised for my justification."

(v25) Because we've transferred our trust onto him, our faith is in him, not in ourselves.

The Christian life is lived by faith now, and God accepts us because of our faith, not works, for now, and forever.

Father we praise you, and we trust you.

You can call into being our righteousness, even though we are not righteous, you call us to life, into your family, even though we were not. help us to walk by faith, not to try to earn that, but to receive it as a gift, with great thanks. Amen.