

God Justifies the Ungodly

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 December 2018

Preacher: James Lapping

[0 : 00] lovely prayers. And a big thank you to all you for coming here this morning. You're in the right place. It's good to see you. What a fantastic passage we have to look at, get to look at this morning. Let me pray as we start. So Father, we thank you for your word, that in your word we find the words of life. And we pray, Lord, that we would heed those words. We pray that what is helpful may be remembered. What is unhelpful in what I say, be forgotten, Father. And may you be glorified and honored now this morning. In Jesus' name, Amen. Well, as Martin mentioned, my name is James. I'm the assistant curatee. I only found that out the other day. I'm basically on staff here at St. Silas.

And I've just come up to Glasgow. It's been great, other than the last three weeks of rain, maybe. Well, today I'm sunny. Well, I wonder if you've ever had this experience, and that there are some things about God that seem more logical and attractive than others. Some things about God that you love to tell your friends. Maybe, well, God is good. God is kind. God is for you. God is love. But then there are other bits about God, about who God is, that is more difficult to talk about with your friends. You might have come this morning, you might be someone who's not persuaded of the Christian faith. And you can believe some of the things that Christians believe. Oh, God is good. God is kind. God is love. But there are other bits that just seem slightly bonkers. What do you mean?

I'm a sinner? God's wrath? Jesus dying? What a load of bunk. Well, I remember walking with a mate of mine called Dave. And as we were walking there along this beautiful riverside, a rainbow appeared.

Dave said to me, well, you don't believe all that malarkey about God judging the world through a flood. As if God would be a judge. And so in doing so, we end up playing down one bit of God over another. Or we emphasize one bit of God over another bit of God.

[2 : 25] We downplay some of the bits of God like an awkward cousin. But when we do this, we end up dividing God. We say stuff like, well, the God of the Old Testament, he's all doom and gloom. He's all judgment.

I much prefer the God of the New Testament. He's all love and forgiveness, all buttercups and cream. And the section that we're going to look at in Romans this morning, Paul is going to build on what he has said about God's plan for salvation in the world.

And so we remember that Paul has already said that all people are guilty before God for rejecting God. Both the religious person who thinks that they can please God by what they do, and the irreligious person who lives a wild life ignoring God.

That people are justified. That is, they are made right with God, Paul argues. Not by anything they do, but by faith.

By simply believing and trusting Christ's justifying work on their behalf. Because of God's kindness and goodness.

[3 : 44] And because this is something that God has done for us, on our behalf, so that no one can boast, all people from everywhere can be included.

Both Old Testament people, New Testament people, both religious, both irreligious, both men and women, people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, creed. No matter what your color is, no matter where you've come from, you're included and are offered this great offer of salvation.

So there is an inclusivity to the gospel. You see, it is through God's plan of salvation, having that vertical relationship with God put right, of being restored in friendship with God, that we become restored in our horizontal relationships, in our friendships with one another.

So that all of creation, all people come together under one head. Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior.

And because there is only one God, who is always the same, never unchanging, and cannot be divided. God is one, so his people are one.

[5 : 02] Well, what do I mean by justification? Well, the imagery that Paul uses is that of the law court, and that we have been declared right before God.

And you can imagine the judge slamming down the gavel and saying, you are right. He slams down the gavel, right, you're free to go. And it's not just that our sins have been wiped away and forgotten, but that we have a right standing before God that we don't deserve.

We are now at peace with God, and we have been vindicated in his presence. Now, if God is going to make us right with himself, despite ourselves, through faith, not because of anything it will do, and if we remember that we are ungodly, that we are people that have rejected God, then it means that God is a God who justifies the ungodly, as he said in verse 5.

So that's our first point that we're going to look at. God justifies the ungodly, verse 1 to 8. So in chapter 4, Paul, in this chapter, Paul's going to unpack what he said in the end of chapter 3, verses 27 to 31.

And we see this as Paul introduces chapter 4 by returning to that boasting theme. So we see this in verse 2, don't we? In fact, Abraham was justified by works.

[6 : 26] He had something to boast about, but not before God. So even Abraham doesn't have room to boast about his own works, the good things that he does.

And the key witness that Paul is going to use, that God's plan of salvation is for all people, and not just the Jews, that is the religious people of his day, and that justification, being right with God, is by faith alone, by simply trusting and believing, is Father Abraham.

And the key phrase that he's going to use to unpack and prove this throughout chapter 4 is that phrase that we find at the end of verse 3. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

And that's taken from the Abraham narrative right at the start of the Bible in Genesis chapter 15. So I'll just remind you of Abraham. Abraham, there he was in Genesis 12.

He's called by the Lord to leave his homeland and to go to a new land. And he's given these very great promises by God of a land, a people, and a blessing.

[7 : 45] And then in chapter 15, God promises to give Abraham children, even though Abraham and his wife are exceedingly old. And what does Abraham do?

He believes God. He believes in what God has said. He believes in what God's promises are. And it is credited to him as righteousness.

And then, if we're moving on down the timescale, in Genesis 17, Abraham is given the covenant of circumcision and becomes the founding father, the most important figure in the Jewish nation, that is all the religious people.

So he starts out as irreligious and ends up as religious. And then it's only in Genesis 22 that Abraham does his big work. We remember that famous story about Abraham going up the mountain to sacrifice Isaac, his son, whom God rescues at the last moment.

And so the illustration that Paul uses to demonstrate how we are righteous with God or justified before God is that of a gift rather than a wage.

[8 : 56] Now, at Christmas, we're all looking forward to gifts. So we're all excited about gifts. And we know that gifts are a good thing. You give a child a gift and they just take it. They don't do anything to them.

They just grab it. They're grateful for the gift. And so we look at verse 4 and we read there, Now, to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift, but as an obligation.

An obligation. So what's he saying? He's saying that Abraham never earned his righteousness. He never earned his right standing before God by what he did.

It was given to him as a gift wrapped up. Here you go, Abraham. It's yours. For free. And well, I gather that most of us have employment contracts.

Or maybe you are an employer and you employ other people. And provided the person that you work, that you provided whoever you're working for, they do what, provided you do all the things that are on the contract that you said you'd do, that you signed off on, then your boss is obligated to pay you your wage.

[10:08] And if they don't, well, then you'll take them to court. You'll take them to an employment tribunal or something. But this is not the case with Abraham. You see, before Abraham had ever done a day's work in his life, God gave him the full wages and then some more as a gift out of his grace and kindness.

You see, fundamental to what it is to be God is that God is kind and gracious. And he is gracious to people who don't deserve kindness and graciousness.

But then also go on and consider what Paul says in verse 5. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God, who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

So what's he saying? Paul is saying that before Abraham was anything, before he was the father of the Jewish nation, before he was anything in this world, he was lost and hopeless and outside of God.

He was ungodly. He was spiritually dead outside of God. And so fundamental to what Paul is saying about how we can be right with God, that is, be justified, is that God doesn't justify, he doesn't call those rights with him, those who are already righteous, who are already innocent and deserving, but those who aren't, those who don't deserve it, the hopeless, the helpless, the lost causes, the dropouts, the guilty.

[11:55] Now, to the first century believer or hearer, that would have been an outrageous thing to say. To the early Jew, that would have been a ridiculous thing to say.

We've read Exodus. In Exodus, God says, you can never call a bad thing good and a good thing bad. God says he'll never do that. He'll never say that the guilty are righteous.

So how is it then that God can call the guilty righteous? Well, we'll get on to that later. But as shocking as this revelation is, it's also good news because all people, as Paul has already said to us, are ungodly and are in the dock before God.

But in God's plan, God justifies, he makes right before him the ungodly. And this is good news for all people alike.

So all people can come to God, no matter where they come from, because all people are ungodly. And this is our second point, that God justifies all people alike.

[13:08] Looking at verses 9 to 17 there. So in verse 9, Paul picks up on and expands on the argument that he's already said in verse 29 and 30 of the end of chapter 3.

So in verse 29 and 30, Paul writes, or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles too? Yes, of the Gentiles too.

Since there is only one God who will justify the circumcised, that is the religious person by faith, and the uncircumcised, that is the irreligious, pagan person, through that same faith.

And this is introduced in chapter 4 and verse 9 where he says, it is through the blessed, is this blessedness, that question at the start of verse 9, is this blessedness only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised?

So he's going to expand on what he said in chapter 3 here. And the answer is, well, what's the answer? Well, both. Because both are ungodly.

[14:14] And both become right through faith. See, the outward sign that you're in is unimportant. What is important is what you put your trust in, is that you have faith and trust.

What you believe in your heart about God's promises, whether you've been circumcised or not, is immaterial. What is important is whether you believe God's promises in your heart.

So, you see, as I look at you this morning, I look at myself this morning, it's a bit of a, it's a bit of a facade, isn't it? So, we come to church, we put on our best clothes and shirts, we try to put a good show on the outside.

I know I could have probably done a better effort, maybe polish my shoes a bit more, and I know sometimes the kids run around and dispel the myth a bit, break the bubble a bit, but we try to look good on the outside.

We try to look respectable and look religious. But God doesn't give a hoot. You see, God looks at our hearts what we believe in our hearts is what matters, not what we wear or look like or signs that we have on our outside.

[15:31] It doesn't matter what we look like on the outside. And we see this because we have one God and God is one and not divided and because we have one faith, one gift of righteousness available to all and because there's one people of God as we believe and trust in God's promises in our hearts.

So if you've lived an irreligious life far from God and you look a bit wild on the outside and you feel tempted to be down on yourself thinking that God would never want you, you can be right with God by simply trusting and believing.

And what does Paul say? He says, well, look at Father Abraham. So join with me in looking down at the second half of verse 11 there. So then, he, that is Abraham, is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised.

That's all the irreligious people of Paul's day. That is, in order that righteousness that is right standing before God might be credited to them.

But similarly, on the other end of the spectrum, if you're someone who's lived a religious life, you've kept all the rules, you've born in the right family, all your family members go to church, I've got this friend who, they don't know, so their grandparents are great Bible scholars, their parents are great Bible scholars, they don't know a single non-Christian within their family, an immaculately impeccable Christian family.

[17:06] So if you can imagine them, they're born in the right family, they look the right part, and you're tempted to be proud because of that, don't be proud because of your heritage and your background, your works, doing all the right things.

Don't be tempted to look down on others because of those things, trusting in those religious badges, how you look, what you do at church, what your area of ministry is.

But what does he say? Join with me in looking down at verse 12. Look at Father Abraham.

Abraham is the father of the circumcised. That's all the religious people who not only are circumcised, but who also follow in the footsteps of faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised, i.e.

before he had all the trappings, all the respectability of religion. And so when we come to church on Sunday, when we come to St. Silas on Sunday, there should never be any one-upmanship.

There should never be any condescension towards someone else. There should never be, well, I'm not going to speak to that person because of this and that. They're not quite my crowd of persons to chat to.

[18:25] There should never be any of that. but only rejoicing as what is fitting for those who have received a great gift from God.

And then look what he says in verse 16 in the first half of verse 17. So just join with me there.

Therefore the promise comes by faith so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring.

not only to those who are of the law but also those who have faith in Abraham. He is the father of us all as it is written.

I have made you a father of many nations. He is our father in the sight of God in whom he believed.

And what an enormously encouraging verse that is that as we trust and believe God's promises of salvation like Father Abraham we receive those promises just as Abraham did and will.

You see Abraham and this is our next point our third point there Abraham is a picture or a model of how we can be justified. He is a model of justification.

[19:45] So look at verses 18 to 23 there. You see throughout the section Paul is at pains to present to us Abraham as a model even to us today in St. Silas in 21st century Glasgow and we're thinking of someone who lived 4,000 years ago of how we are justified or made right with God.

See we've already seen that Abraham wasn't right with God that or we've already seen that Abraham was right with God by believing and not by what he did.

and we remember that he was ungodly he was spiritually dead and that although given the promise of offspring by God in verse 19 he states that without weakening in faith he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old and that Sarah's womb also dead and that he was as physically as good as dead.

So spiritually he was as good as dead physically he was as spiritually he was as good as dead but what does he do? He trusts God. He took God at his word and believed God's promises.

So join with me and look down at verse 20 and what does verse 20 say? Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God in verse 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

[21:20] It was this belief in God's promises that God keeps his word that in verse 22 this belief that God responds by crediting Abraham with righteousness.

So what is biblical faith? What is it going to look like to trust and believe? So verse 18 let's go back and look at verse 18 there.

So against all hope against all the facts surrounding us whatever happens in our life and you know what that might look like that may be like how can there be a God when this and that has happened in my life?

If God were God why would he do such and such? Why has this great catastrophe reached me? Why the evident facts of our circumstances in day to day life against all hope we believe.

But it's not a blind faith. It's not blind. So it is a belief in hope. So it's a belief in God who has made promises to us.

[22 : 29] So God calls us to ignore the facts and look to his promises. Those and we remember that's because it's God who gives life to the dead and who calls into being things that are not.

And that his promises are promises of salvation. But if we have and believe in God's promises in the same way that Abraham did there's one way in which we believe and have them in a very different way.

And that is we see the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation in Jesus. And that's our final point there. So Jesus is the fulfillment of God's plan to justify us.

Verse 24 and 25. So the question still remains then how is it that God can forgive and forget sins? How is it that God can call the guilty and the ungodly righteous and still be true and not disregard what he said before?

[23 : 40] Well in the final two verses of the chapter Paul applies what he has said about Abraham directly to us here this morning in Glasgow.

So let's look down and read verse 23 there. The words it was credited to him were written not for him alone that's to Abraham alone but also for us this morning in St. Silas to whom God will credit righteousness for us who believe in him that's God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. You see in Jesus in whom God the Father demonstrates powerfully that he gives life to the dead in his death the full pavement for sins is exacted.

As Jesus hung there and died on the cross all God's anger at sin and wickedness and all the bad things in this world all the such and such and this and that and all the circumstances that God never wanted was poured out on his son whom he loved.

Justice God's justice is satisfied there. But what do we also see? We see in Jesus too in his resurrection as he comes up as God calls into being things that we're not when we're as far from God as we could be but in Jesus' resurrection we are brought back to God to life back into God's presence by the power of Jesus' indestructible life that perfect life always loving always kind always obedient when we were powerless to live Jesus lived the perfect life and that life was resurrected to us when God resurrected him and we are found in Jesus we become children of Abraham and we become children of God and children of the promise calling God our father so in conclusion there so what about you?

[26 : 03] maybe you are someone here this morning who finds it easier to believe some things about God than other things but do you see that when we do this we divide God you see rather than being inclusive we exclude people because it is only through justification by faith alone not by anything that we do not by any of the marks that we have that all people from everywhere New Testament Old Testament woman man white black everywhere creed color irrespective can come to God and be united in his family maybe you are here as someone who looks down on others perhaps maybe you are tempted to be subtly proud towards others who judges by externals rather than internals do you see that in Christ's economy there is no room for boasting and one-upmanship but only for rejoicing in the gift that you have been given and what

Jesus has done for us and then finally maybe you are here this morning as someone who is struggling maybe marriage is tough maybe job is not going well maybe health is on the down maybe life is just hard the bills are hard look to father Abraham who against all hope in hope believed God's promises knowing that his salvation and rescue was secure so father we thank you for this great example of father Abraham who had his righteousness his right stand and credited to him as righteousness as a gift given freely not by what he had done we pray that we might believe this this week we pray that we might rejoice in this gift this week we pray that we might discuss over our dinner tables with our friends in the street at carol services father we pray this trusting that you are a God who answers promises who honors his promises and loves his children in Jesus name

Amen