

# “Fraudulent Gospel”

*Climbing the Ladder of Counterfeit Christianity*

- Romans 4

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## **Romans 4**

*1 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found 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 accounted to him for righteousness." 4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. 5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, 6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: 7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; 8 Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin." 9 Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. 10 How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, 12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised. 13 For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, 15 because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression. 16 Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all 17 (as it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; 18 who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be." 19 And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. 20 He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. 22 And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness." 23 Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, 24 but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.*

Some years ago while in a small town in the Philippines we watched some women sewing Levi Jeans labels onto pairs of jeans in the local market. They had the label, but they were totally fake. Knockoffs. Fake Levi's. Counterfeit Christianity is a lot like those jeans. Practicing counterfeit Christianity means that you go through the motions of Christianity, but without the true quality. Without the *soul*.

I'm sure there is the rare individual who is nefarious in his or her approach to the faith. The guy who is knowingly attempting to manipulate the playing field in order to advance himself and gain power or prestigious in the sphere of a church or faith. However, such a practice doesn't always mean that that individual is a blatant hypocrite; but rather that there is apparently some core things about the Christian faith that he or she doesn't know, doesn't understand, or doesn't accept.

And the seemingly inevitable slide of that individual's life who is residing in such a state is that they eventually succumb to a life that merely mimics the motions of Christianity...the attributes, behaviors, and persona of what they see around them. Such a person can then languish in that position for years and even in many cases, *for a lifetime*. And while that person generally knows there is something missing in their relationship with God, they may honestly be at a loss as to just what it is. Unable to put their finger specifically on the problem, they

surrender to an arduous life of mediocrity. They are purposely or inadvertently trying to get into heaven through the back door.

John 10:1, 9 *"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber" .... "I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."*

Again I want to emphasize that while this situation often plagues the new convert to Christianity, the fact remains that often people have been in church for years and they still grapple with this situation and retire to a life on the edge of angst and depression.

Often the question has been posed here in this church in one form or another: *How do I know I am truly redeemed?* How do I know for sure I will spend eternity with Christ? Usually one can remember at some point reciting some form of the traditional "sinner's prayer." The proverbial "asking Jesus into your heart." But almost immediately the questions began to surface in our hearts and minds: *"Did it do it right? Was I sorry enough for my sin? Did my life change enough?"* Inevitably people feel like it must have something to do with their behavior...what they do and what they don't do. If I'm good enough, if I believe enough, if I serve enough, if I give enough. It's hard to think otherwise when so much of the greater "religious" world around us apparently operates in such a manner. Do I go to mosque, or synagogue or temple enough? Do I sacrifice enough, discipline my body enough, light enough candles or practice my prayers 5 times a day as prescribed?

This nebulous position inevitably causes us to attempt to form a negotiating relationship with God. We attempt to "deal" with God like a child who attempts to score a cookie before dinner. "God, if I do this, will you...? It can even degrade to "God if I do this I *expect* you to..." Many of us attempt to make such deals with God. Naturally then we think of eternal life in heaven as just another deal we make with God. We give God obedience; God rewards us with heaven. We give our time and money, and we expect the blessings of good health and fulfilling and secure employment. But what does this passage before us say? *"Abraham **believed** God, and it was credited to him as righteousness..."*

Verse 5 says *"To the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness."* The word "credited" is an important word in the verse as well as this chapter. The Greek word is actually an accounting term. We translate it "credited" or "counted." It essentially means that God counts something as being there, even though it isn't. Note that it doesn't mean that Abraham's faith actually **made** him righteous from that point onward. If we read on in the actual Genesis account from which this text was taken we find that Abraham's life would still be plagued with all kinds of inconsistency, stumbles and compromise. In the very next Genesis chapter Abraham doubts God will keep his word to give him a son through Sarah and so he takes matters into his own hands and sleeps with his house--servant, Hagar, to try and produce a son through her.

Then there is the "sister incident" in Genesis 20 where out of fear Abraham declares that Sarah, his wife, is really his sister, so that he doesn't get killed by some men wanting to steal her away from him. He had already done this once before in Egypt back in Genesis 12, so he should have really known better. But apparently Sarah was still pretty hot for nearly 90 years! God intervened before Abimelech touched Sarah...(thank you very much Lord!) There were more stumbles along the way with God's "number 1 man" all occurring **after** the declaration of Genesis 15:6 – *"And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness."*

So Abraham's faith didn't make him act righteously all the time. That's important to understand or you are apt to spiral down that "rabbit hole" of misunderstanding also. We need to be clear on this. That statement to Abraham doesn't mean that faith is actually righteousness in itself, as if faith were the supreme of all virtues, the main one that matters to God... you know, as long as you have it, nothing else really matters. Because in 1 Cor 13, Paul said that the chief of all the virtues was love. He said there that *"If I had faith to move mountains,*

*and had not love, it'd be worthless.*" In fact Jesus Himself said you could summarize the whole law by embracing, "Love the Lord your God..." So it doesn't mean that faith is the lofty goal so awesome that having it makes you righteous. What "faith credited as righteousness" means is that God counts our faith in Christ as righteousness, even though it is not. After all, righteousness as a whole and in any form is a gift that God gives to us that we do not possess in ourselves but is "placed on our account" on the basis of something else. Simply put, our faith is not a really a virtue per se; it is in fact a declaration...an *admission*, that we have no virtue, and that if we are going to be saved, it is going to be because of God's grace, not our worthiness. If we are going to live even a day on this planet with God and through God it is because of Him, not because of some personal "can do" attitude we drum up.

Faith is us saying, "God, I have to trust you because I don't have anything else to offer." According to Romans 4 (verse 5), the one who is declared righteous, and goes to heaven, has 3 primary characteristics:

**Number 1:** You know you are "ungodly." There is an inherent admission in what Paul says here. You know you need to be justified by something else and someone else.

**Number 2:** The individual "does not work." That doesn't mean that the goal is to be a sluggard and never serve, give, or sacrifice for the kingdom. For all of that is so very important, but in another context. We move in those ways out of a zeal and love for Christ. We act in such a manner out of an overflow...a "response" to our passion, thankfulness, and desire to both please God and further His kingdom. Those things are **in response** to our love. It indeed is a sign (for us anyway) of our innate transformation and the natural fruit of now being a kingdom kid. But it's not a new mandate in the sense that now that you're part of our club you have to follow the club rules or we revoke your membership. Working, serving, **doing** does nothing to change your status with God. He doesn't love you more because you **do** for Him. He already loves you absolutely and completely before you are even "out of the gate." You can't earn righteousness; there is no deal you can cut with God.

**Number 3:** That individual "trusts God," who promised to justify the ungodly himself. Abraham serves as the example Paul uses.

In verse 18-19 God declared that Abraham is going to be a father of a whole nation of people. But Abraham was 90 with no kids. *"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed. Without weakening in his 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 was also dead."* He knew He and Sarah weren't able to make babies; he understood how things worked. **20-24** *"Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,(He declared things that were not as if they were because God had said they would be) being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit (logizomai) righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He (you see) was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*

When God raised Jesus from the dead, he was declaring that he accepted Jesus' sacrifice as the payment for our sins. When we trust that as our salvation, he counts that as righteousness. He literally gives us Christ's righteousness. We don't just get forgiveness of sins; we get Christ's perfect record. Jesus was not only a dying Savior; he was a "doing Savior." Before he died the death we were condemned to die, he lived the life we were supposed to live. In him, God looks at us not only as if we had never sinned, but as if we had actually lived the life of Jesus himself. When God looks at me, he sees not how many times I've prayed, how sincere I was in my faith, how pure I was... but he sees Jesus' record. This is called "Gift righteousness", and it is what separates Christianity from all other religions.

There is no deal that we can make with God. We tend to think of ourselves as essentially good people, and if we just try a little harder we can probably get a passing grade on the final. But God's measure of goodness is the 10

Commandments, and it's clear that none of us have ever even made the curve on that list. Jesus even raised the bar in Matthew running our obedience to the ten commandments through the sieve of our hearts desires and even our thought life.

You say, "I'm pretty good, except for being, instinctively, a lying, hateful, pilfering, rebellious adulterating blasphemer and murderer." Jesus said unless we were righteous like our Father in heaven is righteous, we cannot enter heaven. Many of us though don't trouble ourselves with the 10 commandments... we have our own standard for what constitutes a good person. "Be good and fair in business. Be kind." Or, "Be nice; recycle; only drink fair trade coffee and serve regularly at church and make an attempt to tithe, then God is happy with me." Now first of all, you totally made up that standard. Come on, really? Where else does that work? Why think you can do that in heaven? Make up a standard and God says, 'OH, ok, as long as you are sincere...'?

And then there is the fact that you're not even consistent with your own list. You would have to give yourself an F from time to time if you're honest. The truth is we don't have anything to offer God. "*4 Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation.*" In other words, you do something for somebody and they pay. We often think of getting to heaven like that. But the problem is we don't have anything God needs. Think about how foolish our negotiation sounds... "Hey God, how about some obedience? How about some church service? How about if I give you a few bucks?" Like God is rubbing his hands in heaven saying, "Wait, really? Church service? 20 dollars? Now that's an offer I can't refuse! How lucky am I!" We don't have anything that will put God in our debt. Secondly, being good in one area doesn't erase the fact that we broke God's laws in another. Imagine if you were on trial for breaking & entering and during the trial you say, "Yeah, but Judge, I always use paper, not plastic, because it is better for the environment, and I drive a Prius and have my own compost pile." That's great, but irrelevant. Excelling in one area doesn't make up for breaking God's laws in another...

If Abraham was justified by his works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. If we earn heaven based on what we did while here on earth, then we'll spend our time in heaven talking about what we did to get ourselves there. What this chapter tells us is that righteousness—full acceptance with God—is a gift that God gives us while we are still sinful. The truth is you are more guilty and worthy of condemnation than people could ever imagine; and yet you are more loved and accepted by God than you ever dared hope... because that status has been given to you on the basis of Christ, not you. Martin Luther called this the most important and probably most misunderstood doctrine in the Bible... the doctrine on which the church, he says, rises and falls; the doctrine which separates Christianity, in its essence, from every other religion... Every other religion in the world is spelled D--O. It's what you do that determines whether God accepts you. Christianity is the only one spelled D--O--N--E.

Let's face it. God did it all. Anything we have to offer Him will not change how He feels about us, nor will it earn us any points on the board. To live the abundant Christian life is not living to make things right, but living in the reality that He already did. Ours is to be a life of *response* to that fact. A celebration of redemption. A rejoicing in His salvation...

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