

DEVOTIONAL

WHEN IN ROME IV // WORK IT OUT
AUGUST 15, 2021

GRACE
FELLOWSHIP

Discussion Starter: How would you explain the concept of grace to a non-Christian?

Key Text: “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,⁶ 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.’⁹ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well,¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.” (Romans 4:4-12)

During a British conference on comparative religions, theologians from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities: Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. “What’s the rumpus about?” he asked and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

In today’s text, Paul illustrates the difference between salvation by works—the basis of every non-Christian religion, and salvation by God’s grace through faith in Christ—the basis of Christianity alone.

- 1. If you work, you earn a wage—your paycheck is not a gift; it is what your employer owes you in exchange for your work.**

“Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due” (v.4). We cannot argue that God “owes” us salvation on the basis of our works, especially since all of our attempts at righteousness are as filthy rags to a holy God (Isaiah 64:6).

- 2. Righteousness is credited as a gift to our account based upon our faith; it is not a payment for services rendered to God.**

“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (v.5). The opposite of earning something by work is receiving it as a gift. Notice that Paul clarifies that it is God “who justifies the ungodly” (v.5). He does not wait for us to become righteous on our own; rather, He justifies us in our sin based simply upon our trust in Christ!

Discuss: How can these words that could describe a gift also describe the gift of salvation: *free, personal, sacrificial, practical, thoughtful, needed, enduring*? Can you think of other words to describe a gift that can also describe the gift of salvation?

3. David agrees that righteousness is a gift—and thus not based on works.

“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; ⁸blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin’” (v.6-8). Paul writes that David—just like Abraham—concur that forgiveness comes by faith, not works. The person who is declared righteous has earned nothing and has been given everything.

Discuss: Read Psalm 32:1-2, written by David and quoted by Paul. Note the variety of words David uses for sin. What do those words mean, and why do you think he used them? How is forgiveness like having our sins “covered” (v.1)? What does David mean by “*the Lord counts no iniquity*”? (v.2)?

4. God declared Abraham righteous long before he was circumcised; therefore, circumcision is not required to be forgiven, and Abraham can stand as the father of the circumcised (Jew) and the uncircumcised (Gentile).

“Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.” (Romans 4:9-12)

Abraham was declared righteous for his faith in Genesis 15 as God was promising Abraham a son. Abraham was not circumcised until he was 99 years old (Genesis 17:24). Paul’s point is two-fold: 1) Abraham’s circumcision had nothing to do with Abraham being declared righteous by God for his faith—the two were not connected (v.10), and 2) Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness he already had by faith with the result that he became the father of everyone who has faith whether they are a circumcised Jew or an uncircumcised Gentile (v.9, 11-12).

Discuss: Why do you think salvation by works is the predominantly held viewpoint among both Jews and Gentiles?

For Further Study:

“What Does the Bible Say about Circumcision?” article at www.gotquestions.org

Grace: More Than We Deserve; Greater Than We Imagine by Max Lucado

“Is a Christian Saved by Works?” video at www.oneminuteapologist.com