

**WHO CAN BE JUSTIFIED?
ROMANS 4:9-12**

Put this in the category of unexpected blessings. When Kushikatsu Tanaka was a young girl, her father developed a particular recipe for deep-fried fried meat on a stick. Though he was a real estate agent, he spent many of his leisure hours perfecting the craft of cooking the meat (also called kushikatsu), and finally he achieved the perfect balance of oil, batter, cooking time, and sauce just right. And then when she was 21, he died and apparently took the recipe with him to the grave.

Tanaka loved the food her father made, loved the restaurant business, and joined a restaurant and tried to replicate her father's recipe. She failed, and so did the restaurant. So in 2008, after 15 years, the owner told her it was time to close the restaurant and go home. And then she found it. In a box of hand-written notes from her father she found a piece of paper with his scrawled instructions for how to make his kushikatsu. It had been corrected many times, but she was able to decipher his writing so she tried it and — success! The taste was replicated so perfectly, she opened another restaurant — a small one in a poor location outside central Tokyo and it immediately became so popular that clients were still lined up at 1:00 a.m. to eat. She opened another store and then another. And this year she has plans to open 40 more.

All that from a handwritten note on a piece of paper found in an overlooked box. Talk about an unexpected blessing. In a similar way, many of the blessings of the believer are unexpected as well. And justification is one kind of blessing like that — reading the OT, we might assume that we Gentiles have been cut out of the blessings of justification, but in Romans 4:9-12, Paul reveals that we can also receive the gift of justification. Who can be justified? The message of good news in these verses is that —

JUSTIFICATION IS AVAILABLE TO ALL MEN.

To see the truth that justification is available to all men — not just God's chosen people, the Jews — let's ask and answer the questions that Paul asks in this passage:

- 1. Who Gets the Blessing of Justification? (v. 9)**
- 2. How Was Justification Imputed? (vv. 10-11a)**
 - ✓ Under what circumstances was justification first imputed? (v. 10)
 - ✓ So what was the value of circumcision? (v. 11a)
- 3. Why was Justification Imputed This Way? (vv. 11b-12)**
 - ✓ So Abraham might be the spiritual father of all (v. 11b)
 - ✓ So Abraham might be the model of justification (v. 12)
- 4. Why is This Important?**
 - ✓ It removes all efforts at self-righteousness
 - ✓ It clarifies faith alone and exalts God
 - ✓ It enfolds *us* into the plan of God

1. Who Gets the Blessing of Justification? (v. 9)

- Paul begins by referring back to v. 6 and the blessing of justification that was spoken of by David.
 - ✓ The question is a natural one because the Jews assumed that they alone were the recipients of God's favor; one rabbi wrote:

"On the Day of Atonement God cleanses Israel and atones for its guilt, as it is written, 'For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you', Lev. 16.30. And, if thou wouldst say, 'Another nation too [he cleanses', know that] it is not so, but it is only Israel; for so spake the prophet Micah (7.18): 'Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage?' It is only Israel that he forgives...." [Quoted in Cranfield, 1: 234-5.]

- ✓ The Jews also placed great emphasis on the act of circumcision and its benefits:

"And everyone that is born, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day, belongs not to the children of the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham, but to the children of destruction; nor is there, moreover, any sign on him that he is the Lord's." [Jubilee 15:26; quoted in Morris]

"Great is circumcision, for despite all the religious duties which Abraham our father fulfilled, he was not called 'perfect' until he was circumcised." [2nd C. Rabbi, Judah the Patriarch; quoted in Morris]

"No Israelite man who is circumcised will go down to Gehinnon." [Exodus Rabbah; quoted in Morris]

- ✓ So the Israelites believed that circumcision was vital for salvation: there was no salvation without circumcision (no matter the person's parentage or life afterwards), and there was no destruction for the circumcised person, regardless of his life afterward.
- ✓ This attitude was despite the fact that circumcision had never saved any man and was incapable of saving any man: cf. 2:25-29. OT circumcision was a matter of conforming one's heart to God (v. 29).
- ✓ This attitude towards circumcision sounds like the works of some modern religions:
 - Roman Catholics believe that the sacraments are a means of dispensing grace (salvation):

"Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are *efficacious* because in them Christ Himself is at work...The church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are *necessary for salvation*...The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us." [Catechism of the Catholic Church, ¶ 1127, 1129, 1131; author's emphasis.]

- One RC theologian has written that Catholics believe that “we descend into the water [of baptism] full of sins and filth and we arise from it bearing fruit as we have in our hearts the fear of God, and our spirit hope in Jesus.” [Ludwig Ott, quoted by MacArthur, 250.] And he expresses similar ideas about confirmation, and the mass.
- ✓ So the question of who gets the blessing of justification (and how they get it) was not just a 1st century discussion between Paul and the Judaizers. This is a biblical question for our day also.
- Yet Paul’s answer at the end of the verse is not really an answer. He again quotes from Gen. 15:6, but it doesn’t directly answer the question of whether justification is only for the Jews.
 - ✓ However, it does remind the readers of the established principle that justification is by faith alone.
 - ✓ Chapters 3-4 have already established that it is faith, and faith alone, that is the pathway to justification and spiritual blessing from God (3:26; 4:5).
 - ✓ The Jews probably couldn’t anticipate what Paul would say next.

2. How Was Justification Imputed? (vv. 10-11a)

- Under what circumstances was justification first imputed? (v. 10)
 - ✓ The question Paul asks is **how** the blessings of justification were **credited** (imputed) to Abraham. But the follow up question, **While he was circumcised...?** seems to refer more to timing.
 - ✓ In asking these questions, Paul is emphasizing the circumstances of Abraham’s circumcision. What was his status when he was circumcised?
 - ✓ And his answer is emphatic: **not...but**. He was circumcised *after* his justification. This answer had to be jarring to the Jews who had not considered the state of Abraham when he was circumcised.
 - ✓ So what was the timing of his circumcision?
 - In Gen. 17:10-11 Abraham is commanded to be circumcised.
 - In Gen. 17:24-25 Abraham and Ishmael were circumcised — Abraham was 99 and Ishmael was 13
 - When Ishmael was conceived, Abraham was already 85 years old (16:16). So there were at least 14 years between Abraham’s justification and his circumcision.
 - How old was Abraham in Gen. 15:6 when he was declared just? Uncertain, but he was between 75 (his age when the original promise was made, 12:4) and 86 (16:16).
 - Paul’s point is that there was a *very large* amount of time between Abraham’s justification and his circumcision. And further, since there were not yet Jewish people at the time Abraham was circumcised, when he was declared righteous, he was an uncircumcised Gentile!
 - ✓ Without saying it overtly, Paul’s point is clearly that circumcision had nothing at all to do with Abraham’s justification. As Gen. 15:6 plainly says, justification comes through belief, not works.
 - ✓ And if that’s true, then we have to ask, “so what was the value of circumcision?” That’s what Paul answers in the first part of v. 11.

• So what was the value of circumcision? (v. 11a)

- ✓ Paul reminds us that Abraham received circumcision as a *sign* and a *seal*.
- ✓ When Paul says it is a *sign*, he is using the same language as Moses in Gen. 17:11 — the act of circumcision was not a means of justification, but it was a way of commemorating the covenant that God established with Abraham — particularly the nation that would come from him (17:1-2) and the blessing that Israel would be to the other nations (17:4-5).
 - Circumcision is a pointer to another reality, but it is not that reality.
 - In a similar way, the Lord's Supper points to Christ — it helps us to commemorate and remember His work — but it is not Christ. And baptism points to the new life that comes through Christ, but it is not the new life itself. And the rainbow points to God's promise to Noah not to flood the entire earth again, but in itself it's not a restraint to worldwide rain.
 - Because circumcision is just a *sign*, then the circumcised person has no advantage in justification and the uncircumcised person is at no disadvantage. It's simply an indicator.
- ✓ And Paul further explains what a sign says when he says it is *a seal of the righteousness of faith*.
 - A seal was a mark of authenticity. It validated or guaranteed a claim or status of an object.
 - So circumcision was a guarantee of the promise of God to Abraham and the Jews.
 - And in Abraham's case, the circumcision was the *seal* (guarantee) *of the faith which he had while uncircumcised* — it was God's indicator that Abraham had been justified — and Paul is particularly clear that the justification came prior to the circumcision.
 - And ultimately it also pointed to the fact that what God wanted to circumcise was the hearts of His people (Dt. 30:6; Jer. 4:3-4; Jer. 9:24-26).
 - So circumcision looked backward at the promise of God and also served as a reminder that all men need the cleansing work of God on their hearts.
- ✓ So was circumcision valuable? Yes! But it wasn't any more valuable to save someone than baptism is; without conversion and regeneration, baptism is just a bath. Without trust in Christ as the Messiah and Redeemer, circumcision is just a physical mark. But with conversion and justification, circumcision becomes a great testimony to the grace of God to redeem sinners.
- ✓ One final question Paul then addresses is, so why was justification imputed in this way to Abraham — with the following mark of circumcision?

3. Why was Justification Imputed This Way? (vv. 11b-12)

• So Abraham might be the spiritual father of all (v. 11b)

- ✓ At several different Shepherds' Conferences I have heard John MacArthur say, "I'm not surprised that I've spent my ministry defending the gospel; I *am* surprised that I've had to defend it against *the church*." His point is that even in the church, there are corrupting influences on the gospel.
- ✓ And Paul says the protection of the gospel is one reason why Abraham was justified the way he was.

- ✓ The first reason is *so that* (indicating purpose) ***he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised.***
 - Abraham was justified without circumcision so that others could similarly be justified without circumcision; this is then the provision for the fulfillment of the third part of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:3).
 - The Jews had long claimed Abraham as their father (cf. Lk. 3:8; Jn. 8:39); but now Paul says that this physical “fatherhood” is not important, but the spiritual fatherhood is, and even Gentiles can have Abraham as their spiritual father! God *is* the God of the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Cf. also **Matt 3:9; Rom 9:8; Gal 3:7.**
 - No man’s heritage and no man’s work will ever be able to save him. What is needed is faith, which has been Paul’s point beginning in 3:22 (cf. also vv. 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31; 4:5, 6).
 - If you have not trusted in Christ for your salvation, this is your invitation to do so. Even if you are not circumcised, you (like Abraham) can believe and be saved from God’s wrath and justified. Don’t hold back. Don’t hesitate to trust Christ. Today is the day of salvation. Today — the day that we remember Christ’s death and resurrection through communion — is a fitting day to believe in the only One who is able to declare us to be righteous.
 - ... Acknowledge your sinfulness and your desire for forgiveness and freedom from sin.
 - ... Believe that Christ really did pay your penalty for sin and that He really did live a righteous life that God is willing to account (impute) to you.
 - ... Allow His Spirit to work the fruit of righteousness in you and change you.
 - ... When Abraham believed God’s promise, that’s what he was doing — anticipating the Christ who would come and be the means by which all God’s promise would be fulfilled.
- ✓ There is one other reason that Abraham was justified the way he was...

- **So Abraham might be the model of justification (v. 12)**

- ✓ Abraham was justified the way he was so that everyone else might be justified in the same way — that it would be evidenced that there is one — and only one way — to be justified.
- ✓ And the way that he was justified, Paul says in v. 12, is the way that all justified people ***follow***.
 - Notice that Paul says Abraham is ***the father of circumcision*** (i.e., of the Jews), but then he clarifies it — that he is the father not only of those who are physically circumcised, but of those circumcised ***who also follow in the steps of faith...***
 - By that Paul means that Abraham is not just the father of the Gentiles, but he is still also the father of the Jews, but only those who also practice the same kind of faith as Abraham. *You must believe in order to be saved.* Abraham believed and so must Gentiles and so must Jews.
- ✓ Circumcision is not decisive; faith *is* decisive. What we have here is what must seem to be an ironical statement to the Jews: circumcision is not an obstacle to justification and neither is it a determining factor in justification. What *is* determinative is faith.
- ✓ Now you might be asking, “this seems to be such a ‘technical’ sermon — what use is it to me?”

4. Why is This Important?

- Someone has said, “It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of Rom. 4:9–12. The passage means that with one stroke of the pen the entire huge wall of separation between Jew and Gentile was razed to the ground. Moreover, the promise made to Abraham, when God established his covenant with him (Gen. 15:6, 18; 17:7; 22:15–18), is still in effect, and has significance for all believers and their families.” [Hendriksen] So here are three benefits:

- It removes all efforts at self-righteousness

- ✓ One thing we have been hearing over and over in these two chapters is “justification is by faith alone in Christ alone.” There is nothing else we can do to be saved except through ourselves on the mercy of God. And when we do that, trusting that Christ is adequate, then He saves us.
- ✓ And when we appeal to Christ alone, then we remove any effort at saving ourselves (3:20). We are Christ reliant and not self-reliant.
- ✓ The worst thing any man can do is to assert pride and self-righteousness. We have none (3:10ff).
- ✓ Pride is the great impediment to salvation; when we trust in Christ alone, pride is stripped away. And that’s good for the salvation of our souls. It’s *necessary* for the salvation of our souls.

- It clarifies faith alone and exalts God

- ✓ When we trust in Christ for salvation, we are affirming that God is God and we are not. It elevates Him to His rightful place in Heaven.
- ✓ In 1:16 Paul said that the gospel is ***the power of God for salvation***. The gospel is God’s gospel and God’s power. When we are justified by faith it affirms that this is solely God’s work (what theologians call the monergistic work of God — He acts to save us without any work from us).

- It enfolds *us* into the plan of God

- ✓ Friends, most of us in this room have no Jewish heritage, so we would have been considered outside the possibility of salvation; and then God tore down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile, making it clear that all men come to God in the same way (through faith in Christ) and that even those who were outside can be unexpectedly brought near to Christ and into His blessings (11:17ff).
- ✓ And enfolding us into the plan of God it unifies us not only to Jews (Eph. 2:13-16), but it also unifies us to one another. Our unity is made possible and kept because of our identity in Christ.

CONCLUSION: Who can be saved? *I* can! And you can! And all men can — if they will believe.

BENEDICTION: Jude 24-25