

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
Paul's Letter to the Romans – Chapter 4, Verses 9-15
Notes from Tuesday September 7, 2010
Last Revised on September 12, 2010

Songs

Opening Prayer

Introduction

In this class, for those of you who are new, we are studying the Letter of Paul to the Romans.

Notes for all previous classes have been posted on the class web site, for your review.

Last week our reading took us up to Verse 8 of Chapter 4.

Before we read on, I will review a little.

Review

The first 15 1/2 verses of Chapter 1 are **introductory**, but they tell us some important things, including the fact that we are reading a letter, written by the Apostle Paul, to **Christians** living in a city that Paul had **never visited**, namely **Rome**.

In these introductory verses, we first see two themes which continue throughout this letter.

The first is the notion that God shows no partiality: no matter who we are he cares only about what is truly going on in our heart.

The second theme is a fulsome recognition of the fact that the the Jews do have a special relationship with God and a special role in God's plan for saving the world.

These two themes are not paradoxical. Rather we understand that the salvation which comes equally to everyone (Jew and Gentile alike) comes to everyone through the history of Israel.

The gospel is, Paul says in the latter half of verse 16, "the **power** of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

In this gospel, Paul tells us in verse 17, "...the **righteousness** of God is revealed.."

and in Verse 18, he also tells us that "... the **wrath** of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..."

These three verses (i.e. 16, 17, and 18 of Chapter 1) are a wonderful preview and summary

of much that will be said in greater detail throughout this letter: The gospel reveals how God in Christ deals ultimately with the unrighteousness and ungodliness of man and saves us from it, thereby bringing to completion all that had been previously said through law and the prophets.

From Verse 18 through the end of Chapter 1, Paul examines the unrighteousness and ungodliness of man, and we are all supposed to see ourselves accurately described therein.

But Paul imagines that some of us may read those verses and see others, but not ourselves, described there. So he turns at the start of Chapter 2 and begins a diatribe directed against such people, against “those who judge” and this basically continues throughout all of Chapter 2.

In the beginning of Chapter 2 he seems to have in view everyone who judges anyone, but by the end of Chapter 2 he seems to be focused on those among his Christian readers in Rome who are circumcised Jews, and who may be judging other Christians, those who are not circumcised.

Throughout Chapter 2, one fundamental point is being advanced, it seems to me: God finally cares only about what is true inwardly and he cares nothing about mere external appearances.

Various applications of this point are touched on in Chapter 2, concluding with the the point that circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter (v. 29).

If this is true, then there naturally arises the question of whether there is any advantage to being a Jew, and as to whether literal outward circumcision has any value at all. This is the question that begins Chapter 3 and for next 20 verses Paul explores this question in its two aspects. These are the two themes which I mentioned earlier.

On the one hand, the Jews definitely are special, God’s chosen people, through whom God has been speaking in the Law and the Prophets and through whom he has finally spoken in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Our salvation comes out of Israel.

On the other hand, the Jews themselves are at least as lost in sin as everyone else, which is why, in the fullness of time, Jesus came to save them and also us.

This then brings us to verses 21 through 26 of Chapter 3, which is the very heart of the gospel.

Please look with me there....to verses 21 through 26 of Romans Chapter 3.

The law manifested the righteousness of God and, also, the sinfulness of Man. Therefore the law and prophets (our Old Testament) looked hopefully beyond themselves and into the future for salvation, for the day when God would somehow redeem his people, forgives their sins, and give them a new heart.

But now, Paul says, this salvation, to which the law and the prophets point, has been manifested.

As it turns out, the sins which the law so clearly showed, are forgiven, as a free gift from God.

Free to us, but not free to God, who has, in accordance with his eternal plan and purpose, put forward Christ to die in our place, as a payment for our sin, the payment which the law required.

This is the payment which God prepared, before the beginning of the world, and now in these days, he puts forward for all the sins which he passed over before the coming of Christ,

Now that Christ has come, all men can see that God is just, and that he is the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

This is the gospel, and it has certain inescapable implications, one of which is that it deprives everyone, including the Jews, of any right to boast in themselves or to judge others.

Whomever is saved, be they Jew or Gentile, is saved in the same way, by faith in Christ, and not by anything we have done, anything that we know, or anything having to do with who we are.

If we are all saved by grace through faith in Christ, Paul asks, does that overthrow the law?

On the contrary Paul says, at the end of Chapter 3, such faith **upholds** the law.

Q. When Paul says that faith upholds the law, what does he mean by that?

A. The law in itself is a good thing but, because of our sinfulness, the law, without the gospel of God, without his grace, could only kill....**everyone!** Unless we had faith in God's righteousness apart from the law, we could only ever fear God and flee from him.

Therefore the gospel in some sense redeems the law, making it not an instrument death but, rather, a guide and a teacher ... bringing us to seek for and to place our hope in the grace of God, as being the only thing that can possibly save us.

The grace of God is eternal and was foreshadowed in various preliminary ways until the coming of Christ, in whom God's grace as well as his righteousness and his wrath were finally and fully revealed, in the body of Jesus nailed to the cross. There we encounter the God who we cannot refuse, whom we can only love and trust and obey.

And having found Christ, who alone among all men ever kept the law perfectly, we find the possibility of following Christ into perfect obedience, exceeding even that of the law itself.

 We finally never do attain to perfection in this life, but we will do so perfectly
 in the life to come when, it is written, that we shall know Christ and be like him!

Even in this life, for the redeemed in Christ, the law is beneficial, as we read in 2 Tim 3:16f

I think it is fair to say that the gospel is what makes the law beneficial to man, and that the
 law is what makes the gospel the gospel.

So ends my review of Chapter 3.

Last week we began reading Chapter 4, and got through the first 8 verses.

I'd like to begin tonight by quickly rereading those first 8 verses.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 4, Verses 1-8

Will someone please read the first eight verses of Chapter 4 in Japanese

Thank you. Now will someone please read those verses in English.

**1 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather 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
 counted to him as righteousness."**

**4 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."

Thank you.

In the first three Chapters Paul has advanced the notion that all men, be they Jews or Gentiles, are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, apart from the works of the law, and that this is fully consisted with OT Scripture. In fact it is the OT Scriptures that brought us to Christ for salvation!

But what does this imply about the great heroes of the faith in Israel? There is something really counter-intuitive about a doctrine that lumps Father Abraham and King David together with the newest gentile converts to Christianity, people like you and me!

Furthermore being Jewish was never primarily about knowing and obeying the law; it was always also about being the heirs to the promises which God had made to the forefathers, especially to Abraham and to David.

In what we have just read (Verses 1-8 of Chapter 4) Paul begins to deal with this set of issues.

He points out that, however great Abraham was, not even he had any basis for boasting before God. Scripture makes it plain that Abraham was not counted as righteous because of anything that he did but, rather, because of his faith, and that this faith was not something that Abraham accomplished (i.e. faith is not a work that men do) otherwise Scripture would not have spoken of Abraham as having been “counted” as righteous.

The bottom line is: God made Abraham righteous though faith. There is surely no merit in that!

Likewise King David speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works.

This is really important for all of us to understand: neither our faith in Christ nor the salvation that it brings are accomplishments of ours! God grants unto us the faith by which we are saved. Whatever good works may follow, are good only to the extent that they are done by the Spirit of Christ in us. By our self we are not capable of faith or of any good work.

Faith is the free gift of God.

OK. Let’s read on.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 4, Verses 9-10

Will someone please read verses 9-10 in Japanese

Thank you. Now will someone please read those verses in English.

9 Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the

uncircumcised? 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.

Thank you.

Verse 9 begins, “**is this blessing then...**”

Q. What blessing is Paul referring to?

A. The word group is repeated three times, in verse 6, in verse 7, and in verse 8.

In verse 6 it is the blessing of “the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works,” which Paul there offers as a description of both the life of Abraham and of the thoughts expressed by David in Psalm 32.

Then in the words of David in the Psalm, the blessed is described variously as “the one whose lawless deeds are forgiven,” “whose sins are covered,” and “the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

We are speaking here in every case of blessings which are undeserved, of unmerited favor, of God’s grace, of God imputing righteousness where there is no righteousness, of righteousness imputed because of faith, and of faith bestowed as a free gift, not as a work of man.

And this talk of grace is pouring out of OT Scripture

Then in the first part of Verse 9 Paul asks...

(Verse 9a)

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?

The meaning is, will God be gracious towards and forgive the sins only of the Jews, or will he forgive the sins of the gentiles also?

Will God give only to Jews the faith which is counted as righteousness, or will he give such faith to gentiles also?

The flow of Paul’s argument to this point, strongly suggests the latter,

however there were very many Jews in Paul’s day who understood that God would be more faithful to and forgiving of them, because of the special relationships between God and their forefathers

So Paul continues to develop the argument.

 Again citing scripture, Paul observes in the latter part of Verse 9

(Verse 9b)

We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

Remember that Paul has already established the fact that this righteousness counted to Abraham was not because of his works but because of his faith, and that this faith was given to Abraham as a free gift --- i.e. faith itself is not a work.

 Now Paul asks the very interesting question as to whether this faith had been given to Abraham because he was Jewish.

 Verse 10 reads:

(Verse 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.

This is a Biblical fact.

 The rite of circumcision was instituted after Abraham had been counted righteous on account of the faith which God had given him.

 Thus Abraham is himself perfect proof that the sort of faith which is counted as righteousness can be given to those who are not circumcised.

 The point will be made later, that gentiles who accept Christ are like unnatural branches grafted into Israel.

 But here we have a thought that reaches farther back, to the idea that Abraham was chosen and from among the gentiles (the whole of humanity) to become the root of Israel,

 from which the salvation of the whole world would grow.

 It is not as if the Jews had always been separate from the world, a separate species, or as if they had been chosen out of the world because they were good, or as if they had become good as the result of having been chosen! Scripture speaks against all such things.

 God simply chose Abraham by giving him faith, and then worked through him and through his descendants to save everyone.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 4, Verses 11-12

Will someone please read verses 11-12 in Japanese

Thank you. Now will someone please read those verses in English.

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.

Thank you.

So here we have it.

For Abraham, circumcision was a sign and a seal of the righteousness that had been accounted to him, because of the faith he had exhibited, before he was circumcised.

Abraham was, then, the first of many uncircumcised men who would come to faith in God and be accounted righteous.

Their path to righteousness, like Abraham's, does not follow from any ethnic or cultural basis, special knowledge or religious association or activity.

Their path to righteousness, like Abraham's proceeds from the faith which God freely give them.

In this metaphorical sense, Abraham is the father of all such irreligious men who are given by God the faith which is counted as righteousness.

Abraham was also literally --- genetically, culturally, historically, religiously --- the father of many religious people, including many among whom males were literally circumcised in accordance with the instructions given by God to Abraham, including most of the prophets, priests, and Kings of Israel, even Moses, David and Jesus Christ and all of his disciples and Apostles.

Some but not all of these who more literally descended from Abraham, manifested the same sort of faithfulness as did Abraham following his own circumcision.

And these faithful ones among the circumcised, were descendants of Abraham not just genetically, culturally, historically, religiously, but also spiritually, in the same metaphorical sense as the faithful among the uncircumcised and irreligious peoples of the earth.

In other words and in summary, Abraham who believed God and was therefore counted righteous,

is the father of all who have believed God and been counted as righteous,

whether they are circumcised or uncircumcised.

This is consistent with the point made in the last paragraph of Chapter 2.

Here we are speaking of a family of faith which supersedes circumcision.

And indeed one that supersedes religion.

This is the body of Christ...Those to whom God has given faith...and counted as righteous.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 4, Verse 13

Will someone please read verse 13 in Japanese

Thank you. Now will someone please read that verse in English.

13 For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

Thank you.

This is really a strong point.

God did indeed promise Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and Abraham believed God, and God counted it to him as righteousness.

And all of this happened before Abraham was circumcised.

And long before the law was added.

And so the righteousness which comes from faith, and which is manifested in Abraham, and in all the spiritual children of Abraham (be they Jews or gentiles) is not a righteousness mediated by law or by religion or by anything of the kind.

Neither is it a righteousness confined to the recipients and guardians of the law (i.e. the Jews)

Nor is it a righteousness confined to those who know the law.

It is a righteousness confined to those who trust in God.

A righteousness received by grace through faith.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 4, Verse 14 and 15

Will someone please read verses 14 and 15 in Japanese

Thank you. Now will someone please read that verse in English.

14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Thank you,

Paul has already made it pretty clear, that our hope depends on the righteousness which we receive from God through faith, which faith is itself a free gift from God,

But suppose that this were not the case. Suppose that the promises which God made to Abraham and his descendants inured to the benefit of those who adhered to the law,

Which would mostly consist of the observant Jews, with whom we are familiar by reading the Bible, whose book it is! The law, in some sense, belongs to the Jews.

Then faith would be null and the promise void.

First of all, because the faith of the gentiles would count for nothing on this assumption, because they are not and could not possibly be adherents of the law.

And second, because the adherents of the law would be in even more trouble than the Gentiles, because nobody can obey the law and be saved by it, and so the promise made to Abraham would be void in them also, and therefore of all humanity since Adam, Christ alone would be saved.

Therefore the very fact that God made eternal promises to Abraham, if we believe them to be valid and true, proves that these were NOT made to the adherents of the law, but to people of faith.

“For the law,” Paul says in verse 15, “brings wrath” --- “the wrath of God from heaven against all the unrighteousness and ungodliness of of men,” as we saw in Chapter 1, Verse 18 and following.

The law, without the gospel, does not benefit man, but only kills him.

The law, without the gospel, indeed, makes mans situation worse, because in seeking

to justify himself by obeying the law, man transforms his unconscious sin into willful transgressions and drives himself farther and farther from God.

“But where there is no law, Paul says here, in Chapter 4, Verse 15, there is no transgression.”

Transgression is what you inevitably get when you seek to justify yourself through the law.

That seems to be the sense of the last part of verse 15.

It may also be worth observing that law and transgression are two sides to the same coin, neither can meaningfully exist without the other one.

In heaven, for example, there is no law and no transgression because everything proceeds in accordance with the will of God.

This will also be true in the resurrection, when all men have been made fully righteous and godly; there will be in that day no law and no transgression, because, as it says in the Lords Prayer, God’s will be done on earth as it is in Heaven!

But even now, in this fallen world, we have a taste of what it is like to live in the absence of law and transgression...mystically...in the body of Christ.

To the extent that we are filled with and led by his Spirit, there is no law and no transgression, even now.

To hope in the law is to hope in ourselves rather than in God!

To hope in the law is idolatry, rather than faith in the living God!

Closing Prayer