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**The Book of Deliverance #11:  
The Mechanics of Justification Part I  
Romans 4:1-8**

Please keep your Bibles open at Romans, chapter 4. And we are turning our attention this morning to the words of verses 1-13. Picture a laboratory for a minute. You are a chemist preparing a vital drug that will save lives. This drug has several components that need to be mixed in the right amounts under the correct conditions using correct techniques. Now suppose you were to leave out some ingredients or add others, suppose you were to adjust the techniques used or change the process altogether. What would be the result? In all likelihood the drug would not produce the desired effects. It would not save the lives for which it was intended. It would be ineffectual. In fact, it may even be damaging and dangerous, perhaps even fatal.

Now if such care is needed in the preparation of medicines that can save bodies, ought we not to take equal care in the composition and formulation of truth intended to save souls? The Christian gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone in the merits and blood of Jesus Christ alone requires careful and precise articulation. If we leave out important components or add components to it, we stand in danger of reducing the gospel to an ineffectual placebo that may cheer and comfort someone but can never save them. In fact, it may do terrible damage. It may deceive them into thinking themselves safe and eternally secure. They have believed your defective gospel. But all the while, confident in the treatment you have provided, they have believed *a lie* and their sin continues to fester unchecked and their destiny is all the bleaker on account of their error. It is a matter of highest importance that we do not subtract from the gospel what is essential to it or add to the gospel what does not belong in it. And that is in large part of the message of Romans 4:1-13. In verses 1-8 Paul unpacks for us three crucial components that must be there in the biblical gospel. We cannot safely *leave these out* of our thinking without great harm. And in verses 9-13 he warns us about *adding* to the gospel what has no business being there.

Now this morning I want to invite you to think with me about verses 1-8, and then next time we'll come back to wrestle with verses 9-13. (Romans 4:1-8) Here are three crucial gospel components. We might state them as three principles. The first is *the faith principle*. The second is *the grace principle*. And the third is

*the imputation principle*. Faith, grace, and imputation. The gospel is a tripod. Take one leg away and the whole thing falls.

First of all, *the faith principle*. This is a principle that should require little proof in light of all we've been seeing in Paul's argument so far, but let me quickly point out a few of the ways Paul asserts this principle. In 3:22 Paul said that the righteousness of God is received through *faith* in Jesus Christ to all on all who *believe*. In 3:25 he has said that the justification, redemption, propitiation that Christ accomplished is appropriated, "through *faith*." In 3:26, God demonstrates in the cross of Christ how he may be both "just and the justifier of the one who has *faith* in Jesus."

Verse 3:27 explains that boasting in our right standing with God is excluded on the basis of the law or principle of *faith*, not works. Verse 30 says that God justifies "the circumcised by *faith* and the uncircumcised through *faith*."

You get the point? Faith is the alone instrument in justification. Faith alone obtains for us the declaration 'justified,' "righteous" in the sight of God. And here in chapter 4 Paul is backing that point up with scriptural proof. He points supremely to the example of Abraham. Verse 1 asks, "What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?" How was it with Abraham? Was Abraham a "faith alone" man?

Verses 2-5 show that he was. "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham *believed* God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but *believes* on Him who justifies the ungodly, his *faith* is accounted for righteousness.

Was Abraham a "faith alone man"? *How* was Abraham justified? Verse 3, quoting Genesis 15:6, "Abraham *believed* God and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And verse 5 draws out the lesson for us: "To him who does not work but *believes* on Him who justifies the ungodly, his *faith* is accounted for righteousness."

Faith *alone* in Jesus Christ *alone* is the *sole* mechanism by which justification, right standing before God, can be found. This is the great reformation doctrine of sola fide.

And complementing this first principle, the sola fide principle, is the second crucial component of the biblical gospel: the grace principle. You cannot understand the meaning and implications of the *faith* principle without this additional truth. It is not *simply* sola fide, but *sola gratia, grace alone*, that describes authentic Christianity.

And here again verses 1-5 are crucial. Look at them with me, please. Paul is still anxious, just as he was at the end of chapter 3, to destroy all place for human boasting, and so here he shows how even father Abraham had nothing to boast of before God. *Even he* was not justified by works. It was *faith* that found acceptance with God for him. And verses 4-5 really unpack the implications of that: “to him who *works*, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.”

If Abraham was justified, declared righteous in God’s sight, on account of his works then God’s declaration would be a matter of *wages*. You work hard day after day. You are diligent. The work is backbreaking, but you don’t shirk your responsibilities. You give yourself to the tasks at hand and complete them satisfactorily. At the end of the month you go to your employer and you hold out your hand and as a matter of simple justice he pays you what you have earned. It’s wages. He is not giving you a gift, he’s not being gracious to you, he is giving you your right. You go out and buy a fancy car and new clothes with your wages. And everyone asks you how you managed to afford such fine things and you can say without blushing. I earned them. You can, legitimately, take the credit. They are yours. You worked hard for them. You deserve them.

But that is not how it was with Abraham, nor is it the way between us and God. Indeed it *cannot* be. Earning God’s favor as a matter of wage is simply not a route open to us. Since the landslide called Adam’s fall into sin, human beings have not been capable of climbing the high mountains of God’s moral law. All the mountain passes in that lofty range are blocked with the rubble and debris of our rebellion. There is no way through.

No, Abraham does not earn God’s favor. He is not *capable* of working for such wages. God, Paul says, in a text worthy of memorization by everyone who loves the gospel, God “justifies the ungodly.” Isn’t that a striking phrase? He justifies the ungodly.

Justification *declares* us righteous even though we are *sinner*s. Martin Luther said we are *simul iustus et peccator*—we are at one and the same instant *both* righteous *and* sinners. We are righteous at the bar of heavenly justice, through faith in Christ alone, but we remain sinners in the broken depravity of our own fallen natures.

And that is the *glory* of justification by grace alone through faith alone. You must not think to be *good* before you can get right with God. You do not *need* to depart from sin *in order* to come to Jesus. You *cannot* depart from sin before you come to Jesus. You must come to Jesus *as a sinner*. You cannot come any other way. Some of you feel yourselves to be sinners, you know you need saving, but you think you must in some way “fix your sin problem” before you can believe that Christ will accept you or be gracious to you. You think you need to get your own house in order before you can possibly be a Christian. It’s not true. God justifies the ungodly.

And Christians need to be reminded of this great truth as much as any. I heard a story this week of a pastor who knelt to pray after a long day of church business and busyness, but not expressly spiritual labor, not prayer or biblical study or evangelism or discipleship, and feeling ashamed, he prayed, “Lord, I know I am not worthy to come before you today,” and it hit him, almost as though he were hearing an audible voice, “And you think if you have led twenty people to faith in Christ and spent ten hours in prayer, that *would* be worthy to come to Me?” “Well, yes, if I’m honest, I guess I would,” he replied. “If you had spent *twenty* hours on your knees in prayer and led *one hundred* souls to faith in me, *ystill* would not be worthy.”

All the worthiness you need, dear sinner, all the worthiness you need to come to God, dear believer, *is found in Jesus Christ alone*. It is the *ungodly* that are justified. It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. Jesus came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. Joseph Hart’s hymn says it wonderfully,

“Come ye weary heavy laden, bruised and broken by the fall; If you tarry till you’re better, you will never come at all; Not the righteous, not the righteous, sinners Jesus came to call. Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream; All the fitness he requires is to feel your need of Him; This He gives you, this He gives you, ‘Tis the Spirit’s rising beam.”

Then there's the third principle. Sola fide, faith alone, and sola gratia, grace alone, both lead to and depend on and necessitate another principle. It is the **principle of imputation**. Here is the third leg of the gospel tripod. It is essential and necessary. How is it that grace through faith obtains the verdict "righteous" in the sight of God for me, when I remain a sinner in myself? How can it be that I am, as Luther put it, *simul iustus et peccator*, **at once** righteous **and** a sinner? How does that work? Here is where the great principle of imputation is so vital.

First of all, we need to deal with the language. What does the word "impute" or "imputation" mean? Like many of the terms we are called upon to wrestle with in Romans, imputation does not appear, commonly, in everyday usage. We've heard talk about **justification** and **propitiation**, and now we are thinking **imputation**. Now, indulge me in an aside here for a moment. There is a school of thought that says we should not use language like this in the church; language that is no longer everyday and commonplace. "The ordinary man, especially the ordinary **non-Christian** man, will not understand us," they will say. ***Well, there are far worse things than a non-Christian's not understanding the truth! Like losing the truth altogether, for one, or dumbing-down central convictions for the comfort and ease of those who already deny them for another!***

In her insightful book, *Talking the Walk*, Marva Dawn has this to say about the loss of a distinctively biblical vocabulary in the church: "I am solemnly concerned about the corruption of words in the contemporary Christian faith. **When we speak bad theology, we live badly theologically**. When our theologians and pastors and communities reject or abuse significant words in the heritage of faith, our Christianity is reduced or decimated." (Marva Dawn, *Talking the Walk*, 12)

We need to understand that the church has its own language. That language has a unique and God ordained power. It must not be lost. Some of it will be obscure or opaque to those who are outside. But that is the way it is **meant** to be. Becoming a Christian is, in a real sense, a process of learning a new language because we have become citizens of a new country and live under the Lordship of a new king. Christian disciples use the words God has given to us. Let's explain them by all means. (That is in many ways my task here in preaching, for example. I

am called to teach the language of the Promised Land to those who have come to join us on our pilgrimage there.) But let's make sure we use them. We are speaking Zion's language. It marks us out as citizens of another realm.

I am persuaded that we make a *grave* error when we too lightly allow the rich peculiarities of a biblically shaped Christian-speak to be overwhelmed and silenced by the beige banalities and slovenly mumblings of pop-culture. Let's *recover* "justification" and "propitiation" and "imputation." Let's *not* shrug and say "I don't know what that means." If you were hunting for diamonds, you would not discard the jewel because it's encrusted in rock and buy a piece of cut glass instead. You'd work hard to cut through to the precious gem inside. That's how we need to approach such words. What *jewels of truth* are hidden in this rich term? What *glories* are hidden in it for the good of my soul? That ought to be our question now as we ask what *imputation* means.

Well, Paul uses the Greek word for "imputation" a number of times in this passage. We meet it in verse 3, "Abraham believed God and it was *accounted* to him for righteousness." "*Accounted*" there is the word sometimes translated, "*imputed*." The same goes for verse 5, "to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is *accounted*—there's our word again—accounted or imputed—for righteousness." It's there again in verse 6, where Paul appeals to David to reinforce his argument from Abraham: "David describes the blessedness of the man to whom God *imputes*—there it is—God imputes righteousness apart from works."

Imputation in verse 3 means that God *accounted* Abraham as righteous, though he was *not* righteous. He was a sinner, yet he was a *believing* sinner. And because he believed, it was accounted or reckoned or considered as though Abraham was righteous, which is also the point of verse 5. God justifies the *ungodly*. The ungodly man is *declared righteous*. He is *not godly* yet he is *accounted* righteous. Righteousness is *imputed* to him. You see what imputation means? It means accounting someone or reckoning someone to have or be something.

Now, in verses 6-8 Paul teaches us an important truth about this imputation principle. It is that imputation has a double meaning or a double reference. Look at the passage, verses 6-8. After working with Abraham's story, Paul now turns to David to provide further support for his argument. David spoke, we are told, about

the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works. And then he quotes from Psalm 32, “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered, blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.”

Now notice carefully here the double sense of imputation. On the one hand, in verse 6, God *imputes righteousness* to us apart from works. That is a positive action. We are counted to be what we are not—righteous in God’s sight. Then on the other hand, God *does not impute* our sins to us. Our sins are forgiven. We are *not* reckoned as guilty. There is the negative dimension. We are not counted sinners.

And *both* aspects are crucial. God does not merely require a not guilty verdict, you see. He must do more than not impute our sins to our account. To be justified means to be declared positively righteous in His sight. God requires the perfect obedience and performance of all the commands of his law. He demands *righteousness*. And so He counts us both not guilty, and He counts us righteous in His sight.

Now if that is true, the question we need to ask is “how?” How is it possible? Upon what basis does God count us, not just forgiven, but righteous in His sight?

Verse 7 provides a beautiful picture of the answer to that question. David says that not only are our lawless deeds forgiven but our sins are covered. The word “covered” is used only here in the New Testament. It seems to have the sense of laying a sheet or a cloak over something to hide it from view. Why are our sins not reckoned against us? Why are we reckoned to be righteous instead?

We are counted righteous because a covering hides all our sins. They are hidden beneath the beautiful cloak of Christ’s merits and blood.

Prodigal sons and daughters are counted righteous in His sight because, the Father, seeing his prodigal afar off, ran to him and embraced him, and kissed him, and *took off his own robe and placed it upon him, covering his filthy rages*.

Dear believing friends, here is the heart of the gospel. Here is the third leg of the gospel tripod. We are counted righteous in Jesus Christ. We are hidden beneath the cloak of His perfections. The filthy rags of our sin can no longer be

seen. God freely and graciously imputes to everyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ **the righteousness of His Son that we may be justified in His sight.**

So first, there's the faith principle. That is basic. Faith ***alone*** justifies. Then there's the grace principle. We are justified by ***grace alone through*** faith alone—it's not a matter of ***wages***, but sheer gift that leads to our salvation. And then finally there is the ***imputation*** principle. We are justified by grace alone through faith alone ***in the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to our account alone.*** It is only on account of the covering of the obedience and blood of Christ that I am considered righteous when sin still inhabits my heart.

Dear friends, do you have all the components of the biblical gospel in place in your thinking? And even more importantly, do you know ***their reality for yourself***: Faith alone, simple and unadorned, leaving nothing for us to boast in; Grace alone—the sheer gift of God to win us and keep us in His love; Imputation—the spreading of the cloak of Christ's righteousness over us to cover our filthy rags?

Do not trust in yourself. If it's wages you look for, the only wages you will get are the wages of sin. There is no hope that way. Cast yourself on the sufficiency of Christ. His righteousness will do for you what you cannot do for yourself. Trust Him alone and rest upon His grace. Only here is there hope and certainty of redemption.

That's the gospel tripod. Grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Take one leg away and Christianity itself will fall, but hold all three truths together and it brings the fullness of salvation to all who go to Jesus Christ.

Therefore, praise God for the gospel!

Amen.