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WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Romans 4:23-25

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Romans Lesson 24

What is a Christian? Romans 4:23-25

A former secretary of mine told me about a doctor from Texas that she knew who owned a home in Mexico. He felt sorry for the poor people there, many of whom were often sick because they didn't pasteurize their milk. So he bought them a pasteurizing machine. The villagers built a special shed to house the machine and had a big celebration when he brought it down and installed it.

A few months later when the doctor returned, the leading man of the village greeted him by saying, "Oh, doctor, good to see you! If we had known you were coming, we would have plugged in the pasteurizing machine."

We chuckle at that story, and yet it describes the way that many Christians use their Bibles. They know that the truths of the Bible would be good for what ails them, but they only plug it in for special occasions, like when the pastor comes around. The rest of the time, it's as useless as an unplugged pasteurizing machine.

D. A. Carson observed (*Christianity Today* [6/29/1979], p. 31):

The supreme irony is that most Christians hear best what the Spirit is saying to someone else. Speak to the fundamentalist about the truth, and he hears you, precisely because he doesn't need to; it is the person with fuzzy notions about the eternity of the truth who will not hear. Speak to the *genuinely* broad-minded ecumenist about love, and he hears you, precisely because he doesn't need to, but fundamentalists of a harsher variety will not. Speak to the Ephesian Christians about discipline, endurance, perseverance, and sound doctrine, and they will hear you—precisely because they don't need to. But will they hear when you speak of lovelessness? The one who truly hears what the Spirit says to the churches will be the one who is receptive to the words of God that he least wishes to hear.

Paul has spent an entire chapter hammering home the truth that we are justified by faith in Christ alone, not by our good works, not by our religious rituals, and not by keeping the Law of

Moses. He uses Abraham as the prime example of a man who believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (4:3, 5, 9, 22). But now, as he wraps up this chapter, he wants us to plug it in personally. He doesn't want us to cheer and say, "Brilliant argument, Paul! You really stuck it to those religious Jews! Nice going!" No, he wants each of us to apply it on the most fundamental level so that we, too, are sure that the righteousness of Jesus Christ has been credited to our account by faith. In applying this to us, Paul gives us a simple description of what a true Christian is:

A Christian personally believes in God who delivered over Jesus to pay for our sins and raised Him from the dead to confirm our justification.

1. A Christian personally applies the lesson of Abraham's faith so that the righteousness of Christ is credited to him.

Paul writes (4:23-24), "Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." Note four things:

A. Our faith must be personal.

Verse 24 reads literally, "to whom it is about to be credited." The verb, "is about to," has a future reference from the standpoint of the Old Testament, looking ahead to God's promise as fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 242). Schreiner paraphrases it (*ibid.*), "Genesis 15:6 was written for the sake of those who would in the future be reckoned righteous by faith." In other words, Paul wants us to apply personally the truth of Abraham's being justified by faith.

We can see this in the text by the fact that Paul uses the pronoun "our" four times: "for *our* sake also"; "Jesus *our* Lord"; "*our* transgressions"; and, "*our* justification." These truths must be ours personally. And as C. H. Spurgeon pointed out (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 48:560), "you can never truly say, 'Our Lord,' till you have first said, 'My Lord.'" Is Jesus *your* Lord because you personally have trusted in Him for eternal life?

Paul's point is that this chapter about Abraham and his faith is not just a quaint history lesson. We need to apply it personally. The Bible was written so that first we would understand it, but then so

that we will apply it. The story of Abraham is *for your sake* also. Has the righteousness of Christ been credited to your account? Romans 4 won't do you any good unless by faith you are a true son of Abraham, an heir according to God's promise (Gal. 3:7, 29).

Also, Romans 4 shows the importance of understanding and applying the Old Testament. Paul built the entire chapter on the story of Abraham's faith being credited to him as righteousness. If we do not understand the Old Testament, we will not properly understand the New Testament. Douglas Moo observes (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 287), "Paul's conviction that the OT everywhere speaks to Christians is fundamental to his theology and preaching." As Paul goes on to say (Rom. 15:4), "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (See, also, 1 Cor. 10:11.)

So before we leave this point I want to ask you two questions: First, do you regularly read and seek to understand and apply the Old Testament? Reading through the entire Bible in a year is a good plan. I try to read from the Psalms, the Old Testament, and the New Testament, each day. Don't neglect the Old Testament.

Second, have you put your faith in Christ alone, trusting God to credit Christ's righteousness to your account? If you have not done that, you are not a Christian in the most important sense of the word. A Christian personally believes in Jesus Christ.

B. Our faith must be like the faith of Abraham.

Paul's emphasis here is on the continuity and similarity of Abraham's faith with ours. As he said (4:12), we must "follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham." And (4:16), we are to be "of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all."

Last week we saw the nature of Abraham's faith, which is an example for our faith. Abraham believed God's promise and so should we. In his case, it was God's promise to give him an heir through Sarah, to give him the land, to make him the father of many nations, and to bless the nations through his "seed." Those promises were ultimately fulfilled in Christ. But Abraham died in faith without receiving the promises (Heb. 11:13). In our case, we look back to God's promise to justify sinners who believe in Christ.

Also, Abraham believed God's promise in spite of circumstances that seemed to be to the contrary. He and Sarah were both beyond the years when they could physically conceive children. It required a miracle for God to fulfill His promise. But "in hope against hope he believed" (Rom. 4:18). As we look at our own hearts and realize how sinful we have been and how inclined toward sin we still are, it seems impossible for God to save us. But, like Abraham, we must believe God's promise in spite of circumstances that seem to be contrary.

Abraham also believed that God is able to give "life to the dead" and to call "into being that which does not exist" (4:17). In Abraham's case, it was his and Sarah's "dead" bodies, which were incapable of conceiving a child. Later, Abraham's faith focused on God raising Isaac from the dead after He commanded Abraham to sacrifice him (Heb. 11:19). In our case, we must believe that God raised Jesus bodily from the dead. And, we must believe that every time God saves a soul, He is giving life to the dead (Eph. 2:1-5) and calling into being that which did not exist (2 Cor. 4:6; 5:17). In other words, the new birth is a miraculous, life-giving event.

Also, Abraham's faith grew strong and gave glory to God, being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able to perform (4:20-21). Even so, our faith in Christ must grow stronger as we study God's Word and learn more of His attributes and His ways. We don't glory in our strong faith, but rather in our strong God. Our faith should point others to Him, because He is faithful.

Note also that in 3:26, Paul talks about God justifying the one who has faith in Jesus, but here (4:24) he talks about believing "in Him who raised Jesus from the dead," namely, God the Father. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: Atonement and Justification* [Zondervan], p. 238) expresses his concern that some people speak only about Jesus, but never mention God the Father. Others put the emphasis on God, but don't see their need for Jesus. And others put all their emphasis on the Holy Spirit, while some hardly mention the Spirit. Lloyd-Jones' plea is that we maintain the balance of Scripture, where everything starts with God and ends with God. The work of Christ is designed to bring us to God and reconcile us to Him. The work of the Holy Spirit is to apply the work of Christ to us who believe. But it is all aimed at bringing us to glorify God.

Thus our faith must be personal. It must be like the faith of Abraham, although because of God's promise being fulfilled in Christ, we have much more revelation than Abraham did.

- C. Our faith must have specific content, namely, what Scripture reveals about God, sin, Christ, and salvation.

As we saw in our last study, Abraham didn't have faith in himself or faith in faith itself or faith in positive thinking. Rather, he believed the specific promises of God. Even so, our faith must have the specific content of what the Bible teaches about God, who is holy, just, and loving. We must believe the biblical revelation about the pervasiveness of human sin, which renders us all incapable of seeking after God or pleasing Him. We must believe in the full deity and sinless humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to die as the substitute for sinners. And, we must believe that we are saved—rescued from God's wrath—by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

It is important to say that our faith must have specific content because there are those who make the false distinction that our faith must be personal, but not propositional. They argue that we are to believe in Jesus, but not in specific doctrines about Jesus or about salvation. They contend that doctrine only divides us, so we should set it aside and just believe in Jesus without the doctrines. But clearly the apostle Paul didn't spend an entire chapter arguing that we are justified by faith alone if that doctrine doesn't matter for our salvation!

The Bible is filled not only with stories, but also with many doctrines that are vitally important to our salvation and our spiritual health. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons claim to believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord, but their doctrines contradict and deny the Jesus and the way of salvation set forth in the Bible. There are many Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants who believe in the Jesus of the Bible (*not* in the Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormon "Jesus"), but contrary to Scripture, they believe that we are saved at least in part by our good works. But Paul said that the Judaizers, who taught that to be saved we must believe in Jesus *plus* keep the Mosaic Law (especially circumcision), were damned (Gal. 1:6-9). So we must believe in sound doctrine, especially regarding doctrines related to salvation.

Of course, some doctrines in the Bible are more important than other doctrines are (Matt. 23:23; Rom. 14:17). We should not divide over minor doctrinal differences or even over more major doctrines (such as biblical prophecy) where godly men differ. So we need wisdom and discernment to major in the things that matter. We all need to be growing in our understanding of the content of the Bible so that we don't minimize key doctrines or maximize minor ones.

D. Our faith must appropriate the righteousness of Christ as our own.

Paul keeps repeating the word "credited" (4:3, 5-6, 8, 9-11, 22, 23, 24) to hammer home the point that righteousness before God is a forensic matter. It is not a matter of God *making* us righteous or *infusing* righteousness into us, which is the process of sanctification. Rather, justification is God's *declaring* us to be righteous based on Jesus taking all of our sins on Himself on the cross. God credits the perfect righteousness of Christ to every ungodly person who believes in Him (4:5).

I've said it before, but let me emphasize once more that God does not credit our faith as righteousness as if faith were a work on our part that God agrees to accept as payment for our sins. Our faith is not viewed as some sort of righteousness that is good enough to cover our sins. Rather, faith lays hold of Jesus Christ, who becomes the righteousness of God for us (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). By faith, God's righteousness in Christ is applied to us (Rom. 3:22). So when Paul talks about faith being credited as righteousness (4:3, 5, 9, 22), it is the same thing as when he says that God credits righteousness to us apart from works (4:6, 11). The righteousness of faith (4:11, 13) is God's righteousness that comes to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

John Piper devotes an entire message to explain this in far more detail than I can do here ("Faith and the Imputation of Righteousness," on Rom. 4:22-25, on DesiringGod.org). He uses this illustration:

Suppose I say to Barnabas, my sixteen-year-old son, "Clean up your room before you go to school. You must have a clean room, or you won't be able to go watch the game

tonight.” Well, suppose he plans poorly and leaves for school without cleaning the room. And suppose I discover the messy room and clean it. His afternoon fills up and he gets home just before it’s time to leave for the game and realizes what he has done and feels terrible. He apologizes and humbly accepts the consequences.

To which I say, “Barnabas, I am going to credit your apology and submission as a clean room. I said, ‘You must have a clean room, or you won’t be able to go watch the game tonight.’ Your room is clean. So you can go to the game.” What I mean when I say, “I credit your apology as a clean room,” is not that the apology is the clean room. Nor that he really cleaned his room. I cleaned it. It was pure grace. All I mean is that, in my way of reckoning—in my grace—his apology connects him with the promise given for a clean room. The clean room is his clean room. I credit it to him. Or, I credit his apology as a clean room. You can say it either way. And Paul said it both ways: “Faith is credited as righteousness,” and “God credits righteousness to us through faith.”

So when God says ... to those who believe in Christ, “I credit your faith as righteousness,” he does not mean that your faith is righteousness. He means that your faith connects you to God’s righteousness.

Thus Paul is saying that a Christian personally applies the lesson of Abraham’s faith so that the righteousness of Christ is credited to him. Have you done that? It is essential!

2. A Christian believes that God delivered over Jesus to pay the penalty for our sins.

Here we are focusing on the phrase, “He who was delivered over because of our transgressions” (4:25). “Delivered over” is passive, meaning that God delivered Jesus over to death. There is a sense in which Jesus voluntarily gave Himself over to death (John 10:18), but there is another sense in which the Father delivered over the Son (Rom. 8:32). Romans 4:25 is not a quotation, but it relies in substance on Isaiah 53:12 (LXX), which states of Messiah, “his soul was delivered to death: and he was numbered among the

transgressors; and he bore the sins of many and was delivered over because of their iniquities." Or, as it says just a few verses earlier (Isa. 53:6), "The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him." Or, again (Isa. 53:10), "But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, ..." The last two phrases refer to the resurrection, which we will look at in a moment.

Peter mentions God's delivering Jesus over to be crucified in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:23): "This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." He goes on to affirm that God raised Him up again.

But the point is, our salvation, which includes at its center Jesus' death on the cross, was not an unfortunate moment in history when evil men gained the upper hand. Although they were fully responsible for their sin, the crucifixion was God's predetermined plan to give His eternal Son to pay the penalty for our sins. A Christian believes that salvation is from the Lord so that it all is "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph. 1:6). Finally,

3. A Christian believes that God raised Jesus bodily from the dead to confirm our justification.

Paul emphasizes Jesus' resurrection from the dead twice here: "Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (4:24); and, Jesus "was raised because of our justification" (4:25). As Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 15, the bodily resurrection of Jesus is central to our faith and our forgiveness. And, it is based on solid, varied eyewitness testimony. He says there (1 Cor. 15:17), "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins." In Romans 1:4, Paul says that Jesus "was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead." The resurrection puts God's stamp of approval on the death of Jesus as payment in full for the sins of all who believe.

The phrase, "Jesus our Lord," emphasizes both His deity and His humanity. Jesus took on human flesh so that He could bear our sins, but He did not give up His deity. He is the Lord. But as I said, we must trust in Him as *our* Lord personally.

The phrase, "raised because of our justification," is a bit difficult. It is parallel with the phrase, "delivered up because of our transgressions." Perhaps the simplest way to understand it is that Jesus was delivered up to death as a consequence ("because") of our sin; He was raised as a consequence ("because") of our justification, which He achieved by His death (Rom. 5:9). In other words, when God raised Jesus, He put His seal of approval on Christ's death as obtaining our justification (Murray J. Harris, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown [Zondervan], 3:1184). So the resurrection confirms that our justification was valid and acceptable to the Father.

Conclusion

Note carefully that not everyone is justified. Jesus' death only justifies "those who believe in Him who raised Jesus from the dead" (4:24). In other words, this truth that God delivered Jesus over to pay for our sins and raised Him from the dead to affirm our justification will save you *only* if you personally believe it. The pasteurizing machine only benefits you if you plug it in and actually use it to pasteurize your milk. This wonderful doctrine of justification by faith that Paul has spent an entire chapter hammering home was not written as a quaint history lesson about Abraham. It was written *for your sake*. God will credit the righteousness of Christ to your account the instant that you believe in Him. Jesus' resurrection from the dead affirms that it is true!

So what is a Christian? A Christian is a person who personally believes in God who delivered over Jesus to pay for our sins and raised Him from the dead to confirm our justification. Make sure that you are a true Christian through faith in Jesus Christ!

Application Questions

1. Much of the Old Testament is hard to read and understand. Why should we read it? How can we understand it better?
2. Since it is possible to "believe in vain" (1 Cor. 15:2), how can we make sure that our faith is genuine?
3. Why does doctrine matter? How can we hold to sound doctrine without being needlessly divisive? What guidelines exist?
4. Is the substitutionary atonement essential for salvation? Why?

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