

Sermon 23: Romans 4:5: Faith is not a work

OUTLINE

Faith is a gift
Faith is trust
Faith is an instrument
Faith and works

INTRODUCTION

J. I. Packer gives 5 reasons why the Gospel is hated and under attack in every generation¹: Firstly, since the doctrine is a *gospel mystery*, something revealed by grace through God's revelation. It is therefore something man could never guess at or discover because of sin. This is an affront to man's pride and therefore resented.

Secondly, this teaching is part of the whole of biblical truth a *climactic mystery*, so that when other truths are attacked, it will be challenged. It is integrally interwoven into the various doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, the justice and wrath of God etc. So when we no longer believe in biblical authority, God's wrath, or the atonement, it is due to be close to first in line for attack.

Thirdly, since it is a *spiritual mystery*, and can only be understood by those who have experienced its reality. It will suffer at the hands of those who have never been saved, or taught to discredit any real experience they once had.

Fourthly, since it is a *life-giving mystery*, that brings, peace, joy, love, assurance, holiness, etc, it is hated by the devil and will be in his crosshairs for attack.

Fifthly, it is also a *contradicted mystery*. That is, because justification by works is the natural religion of man since the fall, the offspring of man's natural religion in the form of Pelagianism, Arminianism, and Counter-reformation Romanism are all part of the natural world view of fallen man.

So then the five enemies of the doctrine are human pride, heretical theology, spiritual frivolity/ignorance/inexperience, satanic hostility and natural religion. The war on the Gospel is waged on many fronts. Is justification a purely forensic or a transformative act? What are the grounds of my justification, Christ's righteousness or my own? Was Christ's death a sufficient payment for my sin; or do I still need to pay in suffering through purgatory and penance? One particular question continues to plague the Gospel at present; it is the question regarding the nature of justifying faith. We have been talking about justification by faith alone, not by faith and works. However, there has often been the retort that faith itself is a work, and so the waters of salvation have been muddied by this idea that faith is somehow a necessary work of free will that is exercised in order to earn or activate justification; a necessary addition on our part which determines our salvation.

1 J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, (Wheaton, IL, Crossway:2010).

We have stressed in the past how it is part of our sinful inclination to put ourselves at the centre of our salvation. To make ourselves the pivotal point around which everything must rotate. And so as we look at this great faith chapter in the bible, Romans 4, we will have to clarify exactly how faith is not a work that earns or contributes to our salvation.

Interpretations that have been influenced by Pelagianism, or Arminianism, or Romanism have come to Romans 4:5 and used it to overthrow what the Reformation established from the Scriptures. In particular they use the phrase, 'his faith is counted as righteousness' to try and prove that faith is somehow a work that contributes to our justification and that it is not grounded in the life and death of Christ alone. They want to put something of ourselves and our will in the central position that controls the outcome of our salvation. I know that even in my own pilgrimage with these doctrines the doctrine of faith was one of the last ones that was brought into line with the Scriptures. I was so indoctrinated into the self-centred way of thinking about salvation that I could not see how I was excluding the grace of God and the working of the Spirit in the act of believing.

In this study we are going to be looking in depth at the doctrine of faith. Faith as a gift, as trust, as an instrument, and its relationship to works.

Faith as a gift

The first thing we need to do is have a good look at the phrase that has been the spring board for all of our trouble. The wording of the phrase, if isolated, does seem to point to faith being a sort of work, 'his faith is counted as righteousness.' There are various 'hard sayings' in the Bible and our method for solving them is not throwing our hands up into the air and resigning ourselves to pessimism labelling the Bible as an obscure and uninterpretable book. Nor do we allow for the Liberal attitude of gladly allowing God's word to contradict itself and speak about Paul the human author who made mistakes and who was not inspired by the Spirit and kept from error when he wrote. Most error is half-truth presented as the whole truth, a portion of the bible, or a text extracted from its context and looked at in isolation before a number of leading questions. The key to understanding this phrase lies in the immediate and the broader biblical context. Firstly, the immediate context. Paul has been speaking about how Abraham was justified as an OT believer, and in his discussion he has been carefully showing the works oriented Jew that Abraham, the father of the faith received righteousness as a gift not as a wage, that Abraham was a poor man trusting in a rich God not a holy man who earned justification. We saw that God justified the ungodly, this intimates that Abraham did not earn salvation in any way; so for us to come to this phrase and push into it a meaning that Abraham's faith was an earning work, or a meritorious work of any kind is to read it in direct conflict to what Paul has been establishing. The direct context negates any possibility that Abraham earned his righteousness by the act of believing. Secondly, the broader biblical context also disqualifies this phrase as teaching that Abraham earned righteousness by faith. In broader biblical use, especially the Greek translation of the OT, the LXX; we find that the word 'counted' is used in a particular way. O. Palmer Robertson has established that many things are counted to be what they are not. For example, in Gen 31:15 Rachel and Leah, Jacob's daughters are 'counted' as strangers though in reality they are his daughters. And in Numbers 18:27 the

Levites tithe is 'counted' as the wine and corn of the harvest though it is not. These examples show us that the Bible is quite comfortable using the word 'counted' to attribute something alien to what is being described. In other words, faith can be counted righteousness without actually being a form of righteousness. Paul is using a well-worn way of speaking that does not result in a literal ascription of righteousness to faith. These reasons are enough for us to reject the use of this phrase to somehow make our faith an essential addition, ground or cause of our justification.

If faith is not something that we present to God for the earning of righteousness, what is faith? There are four things we need to establish about biblical faith.

Firstly, faith is an enabled gift of the Spirit not a natural work flowing from our own natures. Contrary to popular belief faith is not an independent act of free will, a natural ability that every sinner still has within them that lies untouched by the fall. We need to stress right up front that faith is a gift of God, it is not an independent activity sourced from our own natures. The Bible clearly teaches that no person can come to the Father unless they are drawn by the power of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 6:44). The reason for this is the natural state of our natures because of the fall. We are dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-3). This does not mean that we are actually corpses, rather it means that we are more like zombies. We are the walking dead. We can pick and choose what song we want to listen to, what food to eat, what clothes to wear, and what we are going to do with our time. However, we do not have the ability to do those things that are contrary to our natures; we cannot love God and hate sin. We cannot practice biblical faith apart from the enabling work of the Spirit, (1 Cor. 2:14, Rom. 8:7). Faith, a self-despairing, Christ-trusting, God-believing act is alien and despicable to our unbelieving, self-trusting, God-distrusting tendencies. We cannot believe unless the Spirit enables belief. Paul highlights that faith is a gift. Phil. 1:29, 'For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.' And also, Eph. 2:8, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.' This last verse describes both the salvation and the faith as being given to us by grace. Think of it in terms of present. Have you ever received a present that is battery operated but no batteries? Well, that is like salvation without faith. It is useless for God to send Christ to die, and then not enable us to take a hold of it; He also gives us the faith to take a hold of Christ. God gives us the toy and He gives us the batteries.

How does the Spirit enable belief? Listen carefully! The Holy Spirit causes us to be born again so that from the freedom of a new heart and will we can now naturally love God and hate sin. In other words, the New Birth precedes faith to enable it, not vice versa. Most people think that faith comes before the new birth, and is a type of reward for believing, however this is not the teaching of Jesus. Jesus told Nicodemus that he would not be able to recognise the kingdom of God before his eyes until he had first been born again, and that this birth of the Spirit was an independent act of the Spirit which Jesus likened to the wind, it blows wherever it wishes, (Jn. 3:1-8). This enabling of faith by the working of monergistic regeneration is how God preserves the integrity of our wills yet is the source of our faith. We freely act in believing, God does not believe for us; and we are only able to freely

believe because He has renewed our hearts and wills in regeneration. We are not made into robots! So can faith be a work that earns righteousness when it is unnatural to our unregenerated hearts, and when it is an ability given to us by the Spirit? Of course not, we cannot take any credit or reward for a work that He has wrought in us! Abraham's faith would never qualify as something righteous for it was not something he would have been able to do apart from God's regenerating work; and all works wrought by our unregenerated hearts are stillborn acts dead and tainted by sin. So what we need to emphasize is that our act of trusting Christ is not an act that was independent. It is not an act we can take the credit for or view as something that we added. In fact as we compare ourselves with those who don't believe we acknowledge that it is because of God that we have believed not because we are somehow better than other people.

Faith as Trust

Next we need to reaffirm the nature of faith. Traditionally the 3 ingredients of faith are knowledge, assent and trust. We need to know certain truths for faith to be biblical faith, in other words our faith needs content and an object. Our faith is not merely a blind leap in the dark but rather a response to truths about Christ and salvation. Assent means that we agree with the basic truths of the gospel: that we are sinners, that Christ is the only sufficient saviour, that I cannot save myself, etc. Not that we merely know these truths but that we agree they are the truth. And then finally we have trust, the gospel calls us to look away from any righteousness we can provide to justify us before a holy God, and it calls upon us to trust in the righteousness that Christ provides by His life and death for us. This is the faith that Abraham had, He believed certain truths that related to the gospel, he accepted them to be true, and based on the character of God he trusted God to do what he could not do for himself.

This is very different to the various gospel presentations you find today. We often present the gospel not as justification by faith, but justification by commitment, or justification by proximity. In South Africa, in Randburg, there was a well-known man we called 'Oom Don.' He had a car with writing all over it, 'Turn or Burn,' 'Hell has no fire escape,' as well as a coffin on the roof-which he was ordered to remove. He was a personal hero for a while, and when a friend wanted to paint her car and put the gospel all over it, my friend and I were tasked with the decoration. So we grabbed some paint and set to work painting a hippy version of Oom Don's car. We wanted to put the gospel over in as few words as possible so that people could see it when they drove past. I summarised the gospel into three words, 'Ask Jesus In.' This is not what the Bible tells us we need to do in order to be justified! Let me explain to you the problem I now have with my former presentation of the gospel. Faith has to do with trusting in what Jesus has done to make me, a sinner, holy before a Holy God. It is my sin that separates me from God. This presentation gives a wrong idea of the true state of things. My problem is not that Jesus is outside of me and wants to get in and I by my free will unlock the door, and salvation is then having Jesus 'inside' and not outside. This is not justification by faith but rather something like habitation by consent. There is no mention of sin, no mention of my need to find righteousness before a holy God and no mention of Christ as sufficient for all of my righteousness needs. It is a

poor Gospel. It is true that Christ by His Spirit does come to dwell within the believer, but His coming is not justification by faith.

Another misleading gospel presentation is summed up in these words, 'commit your life to Christ.' This would have been another phase of my coloured past as a Christian. In a zeal for holiness in Christians and a sincere desire to see Christians not merely believe but obey I decided that I needed to adjust the gospel slightly. So I presented the gospel as an act of commitment to becoming a disciple. Any presentation of the gospel was not about trusting in the sufficiency of Christ as the sole means of any hope for being righteous before God, but rather I overshadowed that with my own holiness fixing version. I put commitment into the foreground and trust into the background. Is my rightstanding before God dependent on the strength of my determination to serve Him? Never, it is based on Christ's righteousness alone not my resolution to be a disciple. Embracing Christ as saviour does include taking the risen Christ as your Lord, but your justification does not rest on this act of commitment, but an act of trusting in His works to declare you righteous. If you are worried about repentance and good works, we will speak to that in a moment.

Even the most popular verse in the Bible has been used excluding this element of trust. In our age where atheism is on the increase, the act of believing has taken on connotations of being intellectually convinced of the truth of something. Believing in Jesus for eternal life is not being convinced of the historical reality of His life and death and the acceptance of those facts. If we inspect the context of Jn. 3:16 we will see that Jesus uses an OT story to illustrate to Nicodemus what faith in the Son is like. He compares it to the snake bitten Israelites, who were dying of the venom of the snakes, looking in trust and hope for salvation to the bronze serpent that was lifted up. Indicating to us that we who are bitten by the serpent the devil and are dying, our only hope of life is not in believing ourselves to be healed, finding the right medicine, or some other old wives remedy, but a trusting look to the One who God provides. We are justified not by the strength of our will, the determination of our belief, but a looking away from ourselves to Christ as the only sufficient saviour.

I suspect that in saying these things I might be treading on a few of your testimonies. I presume that half the people in the room have been converted through poor gospel presentations. God's grace works through donkeys. God often uses poor evangelists to do His saving work; there is no perfect gospel preacher but Christ. That said we must still strive to bring the message we preach into conformity to the word. There are so many wrong impressions given by these poor gospels. We make it appear that becoming a Christian is only for those who have enough self-discipline to make a lifelong commitment, how will divorced people feel if you present a commitment based gospel? What about addicts who have a history of failure? Are they to only come to Christ when they know they can keep their commitments? By preaching the Gospel in this fashion we bar the way.

Faith as an instrument

Vital to our understanding of faith is seeing faith as an instrument. A good way to think of it is as an extension cord; an extension cord that we use to run our various appliances. They have no batteries of their own. They do not have a function other than channelling the power from somewhere else. (I am talking about the simple ones without fuses and other additions for the purpose of this illustration). The power source is not found in the cord but somewhere else, it is an instrument that channels the power. I often find the job of vacuuming on a Saturday morning falling to me, and I like to use an extension cord so that I don't have to keep unplugging the vacuum cleaner in every room. Now if I only used the extension cord to try and vacuum would it work? No, likewise faith cannot be offered to God for justification. Faith is seen as an instrument. It has no power of its own that it contributes when trusting in Christ. It is the empty hand that we receive the gift of Christ's righteousness with. We do not add anything by trying to clean the hand, have it manicured or tanned; we merely receive with no intention of addition trusting that what we receive is sufficient for our justification. To view faith in any other way is to violate what Paul is trying to tell us about Abraham's faith. Abraham received a gift he did not work a wage, even his faith is not something that he offered as a wage. But the way in which people speak about faith today is like me swapping the money in my wallet for a millionaires millions, thinking that I have to make my contribution otherwise I cannot receive the millions. Christ gives you His millions without you having to add the money in your wallet, He has done all that is necessary for making you righteous, even your faith is not a work you have to see as a contribution to earn it. Get your hand off your wallet and reach both hands out to Christ saying, 'What I have to offer is worthless, your righteousness is the only sufficient way of me being made holy before God.' The grounds of our justification is not the quality of our faith, but the quality of Christ's righteousness. What are you trusting in to declare you holy before God, the quality of your faith or in what Christ has done?

Faith and works

Let's talk now about the relationship between faith and good works. The temptation from those who are earnest in overcoming easy believism and the paltry unholy Christianity that is filling the Churches is to redefine faith from mere trust in Christ's goodness to include repentance, faithfulness and obedience. They want to expand the traditional definition of faith from knowledge, assent and trust; and add to it the idea of lifelong obedience/repentance/fidelity. Is this a good intention? Yes it is! However, to redefine faith in this way is to be unbiblical and overturn the whole of the Reformation. Do repentance and faith always go together? Yes they do! Does this mean that faith should be redefined to include repentance in its definition? No it shouldn't, for we are not justified by how well we commit to leaving sin behind, but by looking to Christ as sufficient for our justification. Does all true faith issue in life long obedience? Yes it does! So then, should we not redefine faith to be faithfulness and include this idea of faithfulness? No we should not. It was on this very issue that the RCC accused the Reformers of being antinomian (anti-law). They reasoned that if the Bible teaches that we are justified by faith alone, and faith is defined as trust and not faithfulness, then you are creating believers who will not be holy and therefore are promoting antinomianism.

However, in order to avoid redefining faith as a work or to include works the Reformers pointed to the relationship between faith and the new birth/regeneration. The heart of flesh that the Spirit works in us is the source of all true believing. Where do our good works come from? Do our good works come from faith, or do they find their source in the new heart the Holy Spirit has wrought within us? Repentance always attends faith, not because it is part of faith but because it flows from the same source; the work of the Spirit in the new birth. By grounding our good works in the work of the Spirit's act of regeneration the Reformers were able to demonstrate that we are justified by faith alone, and true Spirit wrought faith will never be alone and so avoided the problem of antinomianism. We never have to make justifying faith more than trust to accommodate holiness/repentance/good works. Our confidence is in the work of the Spirit to produce these things. We must not reinvent faith; we will end up barring the way. Horton puts it very succinctly; faith '...does not include in its definition the effects of which the new birth is the cause.'²

Some people might come away from a sermon like this one and think to themselves, 'Nick, give me something practical not all this theoretical stuff.' And the assumption there is that doing is more important than knowing and believing the truth. That is the heart of fallen religion. I hope you can see the importance of what we are talking about in these sermons. I may not yet be talking about how to be a good husband or wife, but I am showing you how to rightly believe and preach the gospel, and there is very little more important than that. Let's answer a very important question in light of what we have been saying; 'How do I become a Christian?' Or putting it more in line with the real problem that the gospel solves; 'How can I a sinner be declared righteous in the sight of a holy God?' Becoming a Christian is about becoming a child of God, a friend of God, someone who is no longer an enemy of God but who is freed from the guilt and power of sin to live a holy life. In order to become a Christian you have to have your criminal record removed and you need to be declared righteous. You need to be justified. The Bible teaches us that we are justified by faith. Faith as we have just stressed is you looking away from yourself, from your goodness, taking your hand off your wallet and reaching out both empty hands to Christ. It is you confessing your sin and need before Him recognising that He is good and has promised to freely give a full free pardon to all those who trust in what Jesus has done to make you holy. Come before Him crying out, 'Jesus is my only hope, please save me!' There is no giving of gifts, there is no buying of forgiveness, there is only believing and trusting in the promise of God's salvation in Christ, by humbling yourself and asking for it. And He will forgive, He gives it freely, He has promised. John 3:14-18, 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.' Believe this! Preach this!

² Michael S. Horton, *Ten Propositions on Faith and Salvation*, in, *Justified: Modern Reformation Essays on the Doctrine of Justification*, edited by Ryan Glomsrud and Michael S. Horton (Escondido, CA, Modern Reformation:2010), p72.

