

Romans: Righteous In Christ

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[0 : 00] Good morning, Watermark. My name is Chris, for those of you who don't know me. I help oversee the community groups at Watermark.

We've been looking over the last six weeks at the Book of Romans, and we've seen how Paul has dealt with three different kinds of people.

First of all, he proclaimed that he was not ashamed of the gospel. He was going to preach the gospel wherever he went. But then he talked about these three types of people. He talked about the Gentiles, the kind of people who don't care about God.

They go at the weekend to Lan Kui Fong to sleep with whoever they want to, to drink as much as they want to, to feel good about themselves. He's then talked about the moral people, the people who at the weekend go and do charity work or go and be good family people to make themselves feel good about themselves.

And then he's talked about the religious people, the kind of the Jews, the people who maybe go to church at the weekend to make themselves feel good about themselves. And Paul has basically leveled the ground, and he said, it doesn't matter what are the kind of people you are, before God, none of you have any standing.

[1 : 28] Last week we saw how just when we'd reached the bottom of the pit, then Paul says, but now God has come up with a different way that you can be right with him.

Now in Christ, through Jesus' death and resurrection, you can be right with God. And today we're looking at chapter 4 of Romans, where basically Paul is going to give the example of Abraham to show exactly what he means by what he's been talking about in chapters 1 to 3.

So we're going to look at the story of Abraham. We're going to look at it in three different parts. We're going to look at justification by faith in Christ.

We're going to be saying how justification liberates you, how it means there's no spiritual hierarchy. And fourthly, we're going to say, how do we live by justification in Jesus?

So firstly, justification, being made right, declared right in God's eyes, is by faith in Christ. Abraham is, in the Jewish faith, the founding father of the Jewish faith.

[2 : 45] Every good Jew, and also the Christian Gentiles, would have known that Abraham was the creme de la creme. He was the model of obedience for every Jewish person and every Christian who had come into the faith.

They knew that Abraham was right up there with the big guys. And Abraham was there because God had promised to him a promise of blessing which ran through the whole of the Bible, a promise that God was going to bless his descendants, and he was going to fill the nations with blessing through Abraham.

And in Genesis 26, we read this. I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed because Abraham obeyed me and kept my commandments.

Seems pretty clear, Paul, doesn't it? Abraham obeyed. That's why he was blessed. That's why he had this great relationship with God. So, Paul, what you've been saying in chapters 1 to 3, I think you better rethink it because look at Abraham.

And, I mean, you can remember the stories about Abraham. If you know the stories where he went and sacrificed, was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. I mean, he showed incredible obedience to God.

[4 : 16] Surely that's why Abraham was given this promise. That's why Abraham was the man. And Paul, basically, in chapter 4, is saying to any of his readers who are thinking this about Abraham, guys, you don't know the story of Abraham.

Let me tell you some of the story of Abraham to make it clear. So, let's just refer back to that passage we read, first of all, in Genesis 15.

God basically comes to Abraham and he says, I'm going to reward you. I'm going to bless you. And Abraham says to him, Thanks, God.

But what's the point? Because I don't have any children. Someone else is going to inherit everything from me. And basically, my life was a waste of time.

Because what you've got to remember, in that culture, your sense of validation, your sense of who you were worth, came through your family. Who you were a son of, and who was your son, was an important status in society.

[5 : 25] It mattered. And so, when Abraham had no children, what that meant in society was, he was useless. He was a failure. No one to carry on his name.

He'd failed. And God then comes to him and says, Go outside and look at the stars. If he'd been in Hong Kong, it wouldn't have taken him very long to count them.

But he says, Count all the stars out there. That's how many children I am going to give you. And do you know what it says? It says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him.

It was reckoned to him as righteousness. In other words, he trusted what God said, and God said, Now you're right with me. Now we're in right standing.

But surely there was more than that. I mean, didn't Abraham have to go on a five-week course to be how to be a good Jew? And then God was going to say, Okay, now you're good. Didn't Abraham have to kind of spend three months going to the synagogue children's ministry, and then afterwards he'd say, Hey, you're a good Jew.

[6 : 40] No. He just believed what God said. And that was it. He was right with God. Accepted. In good relationship with God.

Now, does that mean, what does that mean for us?

Because what Paul is saying is that the same way Abraham was made right with God is the way that you and I are made right with God.

We trust, we believe what God says through His Son dying on the cross and you're right with Him.

You're right with Him. Does that mean your behavior is not important? No. Your behavior is important, but your behavior flows out of your standing with God.

[7 : 37] Your behavior, your standing with God is not based on your behavior. your standing with God flows into your behavior, but your behavior is not the basis on which you're right with God.

Now, if you look in verses 4 and 5, Paul is now going to say, give a comparison.

He says, Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor. but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.

You see, Abraham could live by vindicating himself through his family, but he'd failed. He'd failed. Or he could trust God and His vindication and he became righteous.

You see, there are two ways to live. Either you trust in what God says or you trust in what you say or what others say about you.

[8 : 51] Either you trust in your performance or you trust in God's performance through Jesus. What I mean by that is this. Last week, Tobin talked about faith as being like a chair.

He said, when you believe, it's not just you believe the idea that God makes you right through trusting in what Jesus has done on the cross. It's not just the idea.

You've got to put your full weight on that. And you've got to say, this is where I am trusting. My full weight. Not just kind of half weight on.

You put your full weight on what God has done. But you see, there are two chairs in life. One chair is yourself. One chair is God. Now, as you look at them, they both seem to be pretty equal.

They both seem to be pretty good. Maybe this one's got a back. Maybe it feels a little bit more comfortable. But, when I come to sit on this one, I'd just like you to have a look at what's on the bottom of this.

[9 : 54] You see, if I was to put my full weight on this chair, what is going to happen? I'm going to fall through.

And it might be, you could sit on the edge for a few minutes, but sooner or later, it's going to break. That's what Paul is saying about what it means to trust in your performance.

Because, you are broken. You are unreliable. You are bankrupt.

If you want to use a financial term, you are bankrupt spiritually. What that means is, you have no credit rating before God. You are in default mode.

Your payments have been, you have not been able to pay back any of your debts. And so, if you trust in yourself, listen, you've got no standing before God.

[10 : 56] But then there's one who's got a perfect credit rating, who's never defaulted once, who is totally solid, totally secure, totally trustworthy, and he's the one that we lean and put our full weight on.

Now, let's think about what that means. So secondly, let's think about what does it really mean to trust that Jesus justifies you.

Jesus, through trusting his word, makes you right. Let's think about that. Secondly, justification, it liberates you. Now, Paul says, him who justifies, justifies, we trust, believes in him who justifies the ungodly.

Now, I want you to think for a moment, because the word justification, we've talked about it, it's a legal word. It's a legal term. It's a picture of a courtroom scene. Now, I want you to imagine that when I was younger, me and my brother go to a restaurant, and we order leek and potato soup.

And my parents are there, they're chatting away in the corner, and I've got my lovely leek and potato soup. And then, just at that moment, my brother knocks the soup, pours it all over me.

[12 : 19] I now look like a soup monster. My parents turn around, they look at me, and they say to me, what happened? At that moment, I look at my brother and I say, he did it.

My brother looks at me and he said, it wasn't me. Now, at that point, my mother or father becomes the judge in the trial.

One of us has to be declared in the right. One of us is going to be declared in the wrong. One of us is going to be justified. One of us is going to be condemned.

And you don't want to be the one who's condemned with my mother. But in the same way, the Bible says, we stand before God and he is the offended party guilty.

And we stand before him totally guilty. All the evidence is there. It's not a, oh, he said that, she said that kind of situation.

[13 : 27] No, it's as clear as clear can be. That's what Romans 1-3 is about. You stand utterly guilty. And just as the judge is about to pass sentence on you, something extraordinary happens. the judge comes down and he takes the punishment. He says, he declares his son condemned.

Even though he is innocent of all crime, he declares him in the wrong and declares you, the guilty one, in the right. Righteous before him.

You see, at that point, there is no, it's not a suspended sentence for you.

God hasn't got you on probation just to see, well, how are you going to do over the next little while because maybe I'm going to revisit my verdict. At that moment, he has declared your past, present, future sins.

[14 : 35] declared, wiped away, innocent, justified in his sight. There's no probation period with God.

You're justified. But what that means is this, you need to hold two things together. One, you need to remember that you are personally responsible for your sin.

You are worse than you could imagine that you are. You've got to hold that. God's not saying your sin doesn't matter. He's not saying, oh, your sin doesn't exist. He knows it exists because it matters so much.

Jesus had to die for you. That's how much sin matters. You are personally responsible. You are sinful. But the second thing is, Jesus has taken your punishment, which means you are accepted, dearly loved, more than you can possibly imagine you are.

Two things. Nothing can make God love you anymore. Nothing that you do can make Him love you any less. Justified. Righteous in His sight.

[15 : 46] That's why in the passage it then says, blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.

You're blessed through justification. Now there are two implications of this. Because, yeah, I know that. There's two implications of this.

One is, it brings incredible humility to you because you can own up to your failings and your sins without excuse. Because, think about it, every one of us goes on trial, probably daily, in our offices, in our families, in our workplaces, in our schools.

Imagine, if you're one of the youth, let's say, your youth leader or your parent suspects that you have been looking at pornography.

And they bring the charge against you. And so the trial begins. They bring out the witnesses and the evidence. Exhibit A, dodgy websites on your browser's history on your phone or your computer.

[17 : 02] Exhibit B, a guilty look on your face. Exhibit C, avoiding answering questions about what you were doing ten minutes ago.

The verdict, guilty of looking at porn, ready to be sentenced. Or maybe, at work, you have the same trial. Exhibit A, you forgot to do a piece of work.

Exhibit B, you left work early. Exhibit C, you failed to say, to tell anyone about it. What's the verdict? Guilty of being a useless employee.

And you see, your accuser is your judge. If it's your employer, the punishment, there's going to be, he's going to look down on you. There's going to be tension in the office.

If it's your parent, your mother or your father, there's going to be trouble. If it's your spouse, there's going to be even more trouble. And all of us live under these verdicts of useless, failure, guilty, not good enough in our lives.

[18 : 11] Sometimes daily. And sometimes they may be fair. Sometimes they may be unfair. But the thing is, when you understand what it means to be justified by faith, it changes your response.

Because if you're going to trust in your own performance, you're going to respond when you fail in some different ways. I don't know if you remember last year, I talked about some friends of mine.

How they respond when they fail. I talked about defensive Diana. You see, when she comes across with her guilt, her sin, her mistakes are exposed, she says, why do you always pick on me?

It's always me who's got the problem, isn't it? What about you? What about what you did the other day? That's defensive Diana. Or you have blaming on anything but me, Brenda.

You see, when you come to her with her fault, she says, sorry, I was tired. I was having a bad day. It's my genes. I'm just naturally bad at those kind of things.

[19 : 27] She made me do it. Anything but her. Or then, it's not just defensive Diana or blaming anything but me, Brenda. There's minimizing Martin. You know, he says, well, it's not that bad.

Haven't you seen what Tobin did the other day? It's much worse. Defensive Diana, blaming on anything but me, Brenda, minimizing Martin. And then finally, beat yourself up, Bob.

He says, I know I'm a terrible failure. I'm a bad parent. I'm a useless employee. I'm hopeless. I'm a bad Christian. I know. Things, all four of those things are the responses when you're trusting in your performance.

And sometimes, all of us do those things. Sometimes we don't do it verbally, but sometimes we do it in our minds. When you're faced with failure, when you're faced with criticism, you're in the dock.

And the question is, where are you going to put your trust at that moment? If you put it in your performance, you're always going to be in denial. You're always going to be blame-shifting.

[20 : 35] You're always going to be trying to minimize it. Why? Because you've got to justify yourself as a good, upstanding person. Because you've got to prove that you are worth something from your own performance.

You see, the boss who always blames his employees for his mistakes. That's a man who's putting his trust in his performance. But when you realize that you are sinful, ungodly, you've got nothing in your bank account except sin and shame, it gives you a freedom to admit and to confess when you're wrong, when you've sinned, without excuses, without minimizing, without trying to defend yourself.

There's no mitigating circumstances. Because churches are filled with people, including myself, who are pretending. We're trying to hide and trying to pretend that we're okay.

We look good on the outside. We're trying to make sure everybody thinks, yeah, he's a good family person, she's a good mother, he's a great son, he's or she, they're good Christian.

We all want to put up these appearances so that everyone sees we're okay. But what we need in our church is a greater realization that we are all a broken chair.

[22 : 01] We're all like that by ourselves. And the moment you're willing to see that, it is liberating. It's so tiring putting up a pretense all the time.

It's tiring. Because you've got to be a schizophrenic. You've got to be two people. You've always got to put up the mask. But when you know that you're a broken sinner and need of grace, it liberates you.

That's when you've messed up. But what about when you succeed? Because the other thing, knowing that you're a sinner and the depth of your sinfulness, it humbles you when you think you are good enough.

You know, this is my friend, Superior Sam. You see, he's competent. He does things well. And when he looks at other people who don't do things as well as him, he looks down on them because he thinks, why are you so slow?

Why can't you do it like I can do it? And maybe he looks at other Christians who are struggling and he thinks, well, they're a useless Christian, aren't they? You know, the kind of people they exchange knowing glances in the office when the colleague makes a mistake.

[23 : 14] Oh, did it again. Yeah. They laugh at other people's expense because what you're doing, you're trusting in your own performance.

And what you'll become is the judgmental hypocrite that Paul talked about in chapter two of Romans. You become the judge, but you don't realize that naturally you're in the dock. You see, when you understand God's justification, it humbles you to be real about who you are.

You don't have to hide. You don't have to pretend. Neither do you need to feel superior. Secondly, it brings you confidence because at the moment you recognize that you're sinful, it hasn't actually helped beat yourself up, Bob, because he already knows that he's sinful and he's being very honest.

Now, in our society, what we do is we diagnose beat yourself up, Bob, as having lower self-esteem. That's his main problem. He just needs to have more esteem in himself.

And you know, when Beat Yourself Up Bob comes to you, he says, I'm such a bad Christian. I'm so terrible. I can't, I don't know if God will love me anymore. And often, what I find people say to that kind of say, they say, hey, you're not that bad.

[24 : 37] Don't you remember you helped your grandmother over the road the other day? But, but what we're doing there, when you try and massage people's ego, all you're doing is trying to get them to justify themselves.

You're putting their trust in their performance. Because, when somebody comes to me and says that, usually I say to them, yep, you're a total, complete failure.

Listen, you're even worse than you could imagine you are. Now, at that point, they weren't expecting that. But then I say to them, but you know what?

It's not based on your performance. It's based on Christ's performance. Because, and this is the amazing thing, he declares you completely right in his sight.

Acceptable, dearly loved. When you see his face, you don't see a frown, you see a smile. And when you see him, he says, I am pleased with you.

[25 : 42] And you say, how can he be pleased with me? Doesn't he know all that I've done? Yeah, he knows all you've done. It's not about you. It's about him.

He knows that you are not, you are not pleasing by yourself, but Christ is pleasing. And you're in Christ, so you are pleasing in his sight. And then others come up to you and say, but, you know, I wish I had your faith.

I just lack faith to believe it. Oh, I have so many doubts, and I just, I just doubt that God loves me. And you know what? It's not about your level of faith.

Don't put faith in your level of faith. That's not what saves you. Because, Jesus said, you only need faith the size of a mustard seed.

Someone once said, you can have strong faith in thin ice, and when you walk on it, you're still going to fall through. But you can have weak faith in thick ice, and you're going to be just fine walking over it.

[26 : 53] Because, it's not about your performance, it's about his performance. It's not about your level of faith, it's about his faithfulness. His work on the cross, that is liberation.

Which means your problem is not low self-esteem. Your problem is low God-esteem. Because you think far too much about what you think about yourself, and what others think about you, and far too little about what God says about you.

The solution is not to be, try and be, think positive, either. You know, I just need to believe in myself. You know, I am really a throne. You know, I can take a thousand kilograms, I just need to believe.

Well, you can say that about yourself, but I tell you, you sit on there, and very soon, you're going to fall through. What we need to do is we need to speak more of ourselves the truth about what Christ says than about what we say about ourselves.

That is liberation. And as a church, we need to be doing that with each other. We need to be reminding each other of what Christ has done in our lives.

[28 : 06] That is liberation in Hong Kong because we live in a world of criticism. We live in a world where you're never good enough, where 98% is not good enough because what about the other 2%?

But you can walk into your office, you can walk into your school, you can walk into your home, and it doesn't matter what people say about you. It doesn't matter about what you say about yourself. It matters what Christ says about you.

So you can go with confidence for Him. Thirdly, and we'll just do this very quickly, verses 9 to 12. verses 9 to 12.

Here, he says, is this blessing then on the circumcised or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, faith was credited to Abraham's righteousness. How then was it credited while he was circumcised or uncircumcised?

Not while he was circumcised, but while uncircumcised. Now you see here, what's going on is Paul's readers may have said, okay, I get that stuff about faith. But, you know, Abraham, he just had, he was just a little bit of a step up on everybody else.

[29 : 13] You know, Abraham, he was already in God's special people. He was already circumcised, the sign of being part of God's special people. He was already there. So he was already in a kind of different category from me.

Now, did Abraham have kind of a fast track to God? Paul's saying no. Listen, Abraham was declared righteous while he was a Gentile, an ungodly Gentile is what verse 5 is saying.

The most spiritual person that the Jews could think of was classified by Paul as ungodly, but made righteous by faith alone.

Now, think for a moment. What that means is, I think many of us have this idea of a spiritual hierarchy. We think that, you know, there are good Christians and bad Christians.

There are, there are kind of the Mother Therese's, the Billy Graham's, the Tim Kellers, the Pastor Tobin's, who are kind of somewhere floating up near the ceiling. And you know, and then there's me down here.

[30 : 15] You know, I'm this second class Christian. I struggle to read the Bible. I struggle to tell anybody about my faith. I feel, I feel defeated in all of my life. And I think I'm never going to, I'm never going to reach up there.

Because we think maybe they, they received a kind of, a take 10 spaces forward card, you know, a kind of VAP past God's ear. And, and you come away struggling and thinking I'm just not good enough.

And you think, well maybe, maybe if I just get some more knowledge, I need to, I need to know more of the Bible. Once I know more of the Bible, then, then I'll be able to kind of float up somewhere out there. But let me tell you, getting Bible knowledge is great.

But it's not going to move you up some kind of spiritual ladder in God's sight. You know, that is more Buddhist than the Bible. That is more Confucian than Christianity.

Because the way every single person has ever got right with God is only one way, through trusting in Christ, not through trusting in themselves. That means that every single one of you, if you've trusted in Christ, is on exactly the same spiritual level with God, exactly the same standing with God, you have his ear as much as any Christian hero that you might have.

[31 : 41] That is amazing. You see his smile on your life. So we've looked at how it's justification by trusting in Christ alone.

We've seen how it humbles you. It gives you confidence when you hold those two things, you're sinful and yet you're loved together. And finally, I'm just going to finish with this, living out justification.

Now some of you may have thought, I know this message already. I've heard it before. But let me tell you something, there is no one in this room who has fully grasped this idea that you are justified by faith.

What I mean by that is this, every single day you are going to be tempted through new circumstances and through new situations to put your trust in yourself.

Every day. Every day you're going to be tempted when you go and look on Facebook and then you see just how many likes you've got on Facebook, you're either going to become very proud or you're going to become crushed and you're going to be tempted to put yourself in your own performance.

[32 : 56] Every time you go and face criticism, every time you make a mistake, every time someone puts you in that dock again, you then have got another decision, where am I going to trust? Faith is not about just believing the idea that you are justified, made right in God's eyes through His Son.

It's about putting your full weight on Him in the realities of life. So every time you fail and are criticized, that's a new opportunity to understand in greater depth how amazing it is that it's not based on you, it's based on Him.

So the final two things, what this looks like in practice, I think it looks like when you come across those situations, people who understand this idea, they're people who confess quickly and regularly their sin.

They are happy to admit their brokenness. They don't hide. They admit their eating disorders. They admit their porn habit. They admit their bad temper. They admit where they got it wrong.

Not just to God, but also to other people in their community groups, other people in their church family, because you've got nothing to hide. They're quick to apologize to their wife or their husband or to their father or their mother.

[34 : 19] because confession of sins is a beautiful, beautiful thing because it shows you what we're really like, but we don't leave it there.

But then the other thing is we are reminding each other in the midst of our brokenness of how amazing Christ is and what He's done. So confession should be, now think about it, when was the last time that you confessed your sin to somebody else?

because that might give you an understanding of how deeply you've really understood this. The second thing and the final thing is people who understand this are people of thanksgiving.

Defensive Diana, minimizing Martin, blaming on anything but me, Brenda, beat yourself up Bob, superior Sam, they are not people who are thankful when they fail or when they succeed. But those who know they're justified by faith, when their sins are revealed, when you show that actually you've messed up and you've screwed up in so many ways, and when others point it out to you, after the initial shock, you are thankful because you realize, man, I am such a deep sinner, but isn't grace amazing?

Isn't it amazing that in spite of who I am, I'm totally accepted? And you give thanks because you've got nothing to prove. It's not your performance.

[35 : 49] And when you succeed, you're thankful because you realize, I'm a broken sinner, but God would grace me with this amazing opportunity. This is the gospel that Hong Kong needs.

This is the gospel that we need to be sharing with each other regularly. It's not about you, it's about him. It gives you humble confidence before him.

He's amazing. Let's live to glorify him. Let's pray. Father, thank you that we see that in the cross, it liberates us.

It liberates us from the fears that hold us back. We fear people finding out about what we're really like and what we've really done. And Lord, forgive me, forgive us where we live behind so many masks.

And thank you, Lord, that your word liberates us to see that we can be honest about who we are and we can just be delighting in who you are.

[37 : 02] Please let that become so much more precious to us. Let that be a common language that we talk about regularly in our community groups, in our families, in our offices, that we proclaim the gospel, that it's only through you, only through your death, that we accept it.

Amen.