

Romans 4:5

Pastor: Romans 4:5: God justifies those who do not work.

“But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

Paul contrasts the laborer¹ who receives wages (Romans 4:4),² “to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, [whose] faith is credited as righteousness.” The context of Romans 4:5-7, and the specific appeal to *ton dikaionta ton asebe* (τὸν δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἄσεβῆ), “Him who justifies the ungodly,” makes it clear that the justification/righteousness in view *here* is a declaration of innocence from human sins. Romans 4:5-7³ should be read in view of Romans 3:26 preceding, and the final sacrifice of Yeshua present. This is important not only for understanding the unmerited favor present in the good news, but also because of the presence of various Tanach statements such as Exodus 23:7, “Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty,” or Proverbs 17:15, “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD.” The inability to see the guilty acquitted of their crimes, or human judges judging with an unfair scale—are both attestations to the significance of the Messiah event in human history. Only the sacrifice of Yeshua the Messiah, the Son of God, for the sins of humanity, **can bring about the availability of permanent forgiveness**, which was inaccessible in the pre-resurrection era.

The terminology *mē ergazomenō* (μὴ ἐργαζομένῳ), “the one who does not work,” is paraphrased by The Amplified Bible with, “But to one who, not working [by the Law], trusts (believes fully) in Him Who justifies the ungodly.” This kind of a rendering can catch a great deal of Messianic readers completely off guard. Is Paul speaking against good works in Romans 4:5? There are some contemporary Christian pastors who might draw this assessment, taking one or two phrases out of context. A commentator like Douglas J. Moo, who thinks that the Torah was only for the pre-resurrection era, still has to recognize that Romans 4:5 cannot be taken as any Pauline declaration *against* Believers demonstrating good works. He explains, “As Calvin rightly emphasizes, Paul is the last theologian who would countenance a complacent Christian, unconcerned with the active putting into practice of one’s faith. Rather, what Paul has in mind...is the person who does not depend on her works for her standing before God.”⁴ Moo goes on to describe how “faith for Paul is something qualitatively distinct from any human-originated endeavor,”⁵ and proceeds to correctly explain what such faith is to involve for people:

“Paul has in mind a creative act, whereby the believer is freely given a new ‘status.’ What is highlighted by the phrase is the nature of God—loving, freely giving, and incapable of being put under obligation to any human being. It is the person who believes in *this* God, and who thereby in his belief renounces any claim on God that his good works might exert, whose ‘faith is reckoned for righteousness.’ Likewise, it becomes clear again that faith for Paul is something qualitatively distinct from any human-originated endeavor.”⁶

Paul’s statement in Romans 4:5 has nothing to do with good works resultant from one’s justification (cf. Ephesians 2:10), but instead speaks against human actions trying to merit justification, forgiveness, and a declaration of innocence verdict. In Abraham’s case, Paul views his faith in God’s promises as reckoning him or crediting him righteous (Romans 4:3), which is something he did not work for in his own human strength. Contrary to this would be the laborer who just earns his pay. John R.W. Stott observes,

¹ This entry has been adapted from the commentary *Romans for the Practical Messianic*.

² “Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due” (Romans 4:4).

³ “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED [Psalm 32:1-2]” (Romans 4:5-7).

⁴ Moo, *Romans*, 264.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

“The contrast between these two kinds of ‘crediting’ should now be clear. In the context of business, those who work should have their wages credited to them as a right, a debt, an obligation, for they have earned them. In the context of justification, however, to those who do not work, and therefore have no right to payment, but who instead put their trust in God who justifies the ungodly...their *faith* is *credited* to them as *righteousness*, that is, they are given righteousness as a free and unearned gift of grace by faith.”⁷

That God credits justification to those who have faith, **should significantly highlight its value and significance**. There is nothing in our human strength that we can do to earn forgiveness from our sins, and a declaration of innocence upon us. Unlike the worker who is paid his due wages, our redemption is freely credited to us by the trust we place in God, His Messiah, and His promises of eternal life.

⁷ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), pp 125-126.