

Romans 4:4-8—Understanding The Difference Between Grace And Works

Memory Verse

Romans 12:1-2 NKJV

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Introduction: What we have learned so far about grace vs works

Romans 3:1-3 NKJV

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*”

Last time we saw that Abraham did have things he could **boast about, but not before God** (Romans 4:2). He left Ur of the Chaldeans to go to a land that God was yet to show him. He dwelt in the land of Canaan as a sojourner (temporary resident or pilgrim), living in a tent for most of his life. He waited 25 years for God to fulfil His promise to give him a son. He was willing to offer up his only son Isaac. But none of these things mattered **before God**.

The only thing that really mattered, the only thing that made any difference at all to Abraham’s eternal destiny, as well as God’s acceptance of him and favour towards him in everyday life, was his decision to put his trust in the coming Saviour who would one day come and pay the price for his sins—“***Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness***” (Romans 4:3).

Consider what Paul said to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ² And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, **I am nothing**. ³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, **it profits me nothing**” (NKJV).

These verses help us to understand the difference between grace and works described in Romans 4:4-5:

“Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. ⁵ But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness” (NKJV).

“When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned. ⁵ But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners” (NLT).

Simply put, there are only two possible attitudes for us to have:

1. A works based attitude or way of thinking (being controlled by our sinful nature)

I think this way when I am deceived (i.e. controlled by my sinful nature—remember that all of us are controlled—and deceived—by our sinful nature at least some of the time).

I may intellectually agree with what Paul said in Romans 7:18 AMP—“*For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot perform it. [I have the intention and urge to do what is right, but no power to carry it out.]*”. However, my sinful nature refuses to believe it. I have fallen for the lie that there is at least something good in fallen mankind, that (as psychology teaches), mankind is inherently good, and it’s only his environment that causes him to do and think evil things (the blame game—it’s never my fault).

When I follow my sinful nature and deceive myself into thinking that “in me dwells some good”, then it leads me to believe that I must be worthy of, and also able to, earn or merit God’s favour. Why is this so appealing to my sinful nature? *It means I don’t have to humble myself to receive anything from God—I can live independently of God, and do what I want.* What does this look like in the life of a believer?

I think that I have earned something, and therefore am owed something. It’s the “earn and deserve” way of thinking—“I did this, so God (or someone else) owes me that”. A works based attitude is a purely selfish attitude, as I am only thinking about what I did, and what I can get—*my life revolves around me getting what I want—I only do something if it is somehow to my advantage and/or gives me pleasure.*

A works based attitude is also purely prideful and boastful. When looking at what God has allowed me to achieve and what He has given me, instead of giving thanks to God, I think, “wow, look at me, I must be pretty good!”—all the credit goes to me—I’m so worthy, so wonderful. This makes me ungrateful, because I believe that I have nothing to be thankful for—after all, why should I be thankful for something that I think I didn’t receive. This works based thinking is also worldly wisdom—it’s demonic—but this is who we are when we are controlled by our sinful human nature.

1 Corinthians 3:18-20 AMP

Let no person deceive himself. If anyone among you supposes that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool [let him discard his worldly discernment and recognise himself as dull, stupid, and foolish, without true learning and scholarship], that he may become [really] wise. [Isa. 5:21.] ¹⁹ For this world’s wisdom is foolishness (absurdity and stupidity) with God, for it is written, He lays hold of the wise in their [own] craftiness; [Job 5:13.] ²⁰ And again, The Lord knows the thoughts and reasonings of the [humanly] wise and recognises how futile they are. [Ps. 94:11.]

James 3:13-18 NLT

If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honourable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from [God's] wisdom.¹⁴ But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth [pretend to be someone else] with boasting and lying.¹⁵ For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic [the fruit of the sinful nature].¹⁶ For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition [pride], there you will find disorder and evil of every kind.

¹⁷ But the *wisdom from above [the fruit of the Spirit]* is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others [humble]. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favouritism and is always sincere.

¹⁸ And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.

Let's have a look at what this "*wisdom from above*" looks like.

2. A grace based attitude or way of thinking (being controlled by the new nature)

First I must accept that I was born with a sinful or completely corrupted human nature (see Romans 7:18). The logical conclusions of this are that I am completely unworthy of receiving anything from God, and also completely incapable of doing anything to earn or deserve God's favour.

This leads me to understand that *there is nothing that I have that I did not first receive—I understand that I can not work for, earn, merit, or deserve anything*. "What have you that was not given to you? [nothing]. If [since] then you received it [from someone], why do you boast as if you had not received [but had gained it by your own efforts]?" (1 Corinthians 4:7b AMP).

I must then choose to stop trusting in my own imagined strength and goodness, and instead humble myself and submissively throw myself onto God's mercy, trusting what the Bible says about the nature and character of God. By faith I understand that God is by nature loving, merciful, kind, forgiving, and generous. This causes me to be grateful, thankful, and, in turn, kind and loving to others. I naturally follow Jesus' command to his disciples, "freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8b NKJV). This is the opposite of being selfish, proud, boastful, and ungrateful, which is the fruit of the old nature.

Coming back to 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, we see that anything that Abraham did with a "works based" or "earn and deserve" mentality would *profit him nothing*. *Nothing that God wants to give us can be earned or merited—it can only be humbly received—meaning that we ask for it understanding that we don't deserve it, and it is impossible for us to earn it*. Abraham had **something to boast about, but not before God**.

Therefore, *Abraham was saved simply by putting his trust in something that God promised to do for him that Abraham could never do for himself*; God would become a man, live a perfect life, and die in his place as his substitute sacrifice. Why? To pay the penalty for his sins—God would be his Saviour Who would save him from his sins.

It was only when Abraham began to understand the extreme sacrifice that God was willing to make for a wretched sinner like him, and was willing to humbly receive that gift, that he became grateful and thankful. Abraham's natural response as a new believer was *to love God in return* for what God had already done (or had promised to do) for him. This is why we need to continuously hear and study the gospel, because it constantly points us back to Jesus, reminding us that Jesus died for us sinners, His enemies.

One of the important things we will learn this week is just why pride or a works based mentality is so offensive to God. We will also continue to see how Scripture clearly distinguishes an attitude of grace from an attitude of works.

Outline

1. (v 4) The difference between grace and works
2. (v 5) We cannot work for or earn our salvation
3. (vs 6-8) Oh the joy of living by faith in God and not works

Romans 4:1-8 NKJV

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

⁴ Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.⁵ But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

⁶ just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: ⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.”

1. The difference between *grace* and *works*

Romans 4:4 NKJV

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

Romans 4:4 NLT

When people work, their wages are not a gift [grace], but something they have earned.

v 4 **Grace:** What is grace? “Signified in classical authors a favour done out of the spontaneous generosity of the heart **without any expectation or return [no debt owed]**. Of course, this favour was always done to one’s friend, never to an enemy ... But when *charis* comes into the New Testament, it takes an infinite leap forward, for the favour God did at Calvary was for those who hated Him.” (Wuest)

Grace can also be described using an acronym: we receive “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense”.

Grace is not laziness. “The antithesis is not simply between the worker and the non-worker but between the worker and person who does not work *but believes*.” (Murray)

v 4 **Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt:** Just like *hot* is the opposite of *cold*, and *tall* is the opposite of *short*, Paul tells us that the principle of grace is the opposite of the principal of works. A gift cannot be earned, otherwise it is not a gift. In contrast, if I work for something then I am owed a debt—I have earned or merited it—so it cannot be described as a gift.

Romans 11:6 NKJV

And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.

Romans 11:6 NLT

And since it is through God's kindness, then it is not by their good works. For in that case, God's grace would not be what it really is—free and undeserved.

Romans 11:6 AMP

But if it is by grace (His unmerited favour and graciousness), it is no longer conditioned on works or anything men have done. Otherwise, grace would no longer be grace [it would be meaningless].

v 4 **Not counted as grace but as debt:** If I do something for someone, and my motivation is to get something back from them or to impress them, then I'm working, not giving. This is the principal or attitude of works or law based thinking—if I do this, then I can get that and/or they will think of me like this (earn and deserve thinking). When it comes to the gospel, the temptation is to think that we can earn God's favour, that somehow we can make God owe us something. It could be salvation, or smaller things like everyday blessings.

2. We cannot work for or earn our salvation

Romans 4:5 NKJV

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness

v 5 **But to him who does not work:** There is no way of stating this any clearer.

“If I come to God with a law based or works mentality, then I disqualify myself from receiving anything from God.”

For a person to be saved—for a person to not come to God with a works mentality—they need to understand and believe two things:

1. What God did for me—I first need to understand that as a sinner I can't save myself

God won't let us work for, earn, or merit our salvation. Why? We can't! How can we ever repay the greatest gift that God could ever give? Working to earn our salvation from God is like a child saving all their pocket money until they have enough money to buy the world. If God didn't become a man and die in our place, then it would be impossible for any of us to be saved—instead He would have to send all people to hell as we deserve.

2. Why God did it for me—I also need to understand grace.

When we come to God and believe, we are not only believing that what He did made our salvation possible, but also *why* He did it—we must also believe that God loves us. “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). The cross is a demonstration of grace, where God chose to love those who are unlovely and don't deserve to be loved.

“Without first understanding that I am a fully depraved sinner, and the gracious nature and character of God, I will always fall into a works mentality.”

“By this we understand that there are not two ways of salvation—saved by works through law-keeping in the Old Testament and saved by grace through faith in the New Testament. Everyone who has ever been saved—Old or New Testament—is saved by grace through faith, through their relationship of a trusting love with God. Because of the New Covenant we have *benefits* of salvation that Old Testament saints did not have but we do not have a different *manner* of salvation.” (David Guzik)

Application: There is no free lunch, or is there?

The natural tendency of our sinful human nature is to try to earn favour, not just with God, but with everyone. As the saying goes, “there is no free lunch”. Generally speaking, this world works on the selfish principle that, “if I do something for you, then you will do something for me.” Why? Because our human nature is by nature selfish, always looking for what I can get. Thus we are willing to help others because we know that we’ll probably get something back from them. This is *works* or *law* based thinking, a *works* or *law* based mentality. This is how the world operates—*no free lunch*. But God is the opposite. God is gracious. He operates by *grace* based thinking, a *grace* based mentality. God gives without expecting anything in return. Jesus describes the difference between grace (a free lunch) and works (no free lunch) in:

Luke 6:32-36 NLT

“If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them [**no free lunch**]! ³³ And if you do good only to those who do good to you [**no free lunch**], why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much! ³⁴ And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return [**no free lunch**].

³⁵ “Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid [**a free lunch**]. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for He is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked [**a free lunch**]. ³⁶ You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.

In reality, worldly or works or law based thinking is loveless because it’s selfish, it’s all about what I can get, and me having expectations on the people around me. This is why a works based mentality kills any true friendship or relationship. If we have expectations of others, thinking that they should do this for me because I’ve done this for them, then we are living by a works based mentality. Why is this so bad? Because either way the other person loses. If the person meets our expectations, then good!, they should!—it’s what we expected of them anyway! There is no gratitude or thankfulness, just the attitude of, “well you’d better, you owe me”.

On the other hand, if they don’t meet our expectations, then we think of them as letting us down and we get angry with them—“*you let me down, now I hate you*” (grace would forgive instead). Either way, there’s no love, and therefore no relationship. The other person just feels used and crushed. As the saying goes, “I’m dammed if I do and I’m dammed if I don’t”. This is the savage effect a works or law based attitude has on all relationships.

Legalism breaks God's heart: "...because I was crushed by their adulterous heart which has departed from Me..." (Ezekiel 6:9)

So try to imagine how God feels when we approach Him with a works based mentality. He blesses us and we say, "Well after all my hard work, I'm getting what I deserve— You owed me this God." Or, God as our loving Father allows a trial to come our way, which we need so we can grow, and we respond like spoiled children saying, "I'm so angry with God... I deserve better than this... After all I've done for Him... I can't believe that He would let me down... I hate you God... I can't trust you anymore God".

When we approach God this way He is "dammed if He does and damned if He doesn't". If He blesses us then we just expect more from Him. If He disciplines us then we hate Him. All God wants is to enjoy a love relationship with us, but a works mentality makes that impossible.

"This is what makes a works based attitude so offensive and hurtful to God. We take all the blessings that God gives us and throw them back in His face. We question His motives and deny that He loves us. We refuse to trust Him."

"There is no greater hurt than to have your love questioned and refused."

This is why law based thinking (trusting in ourselves and relying on our own strength and goodness), is the greatest threat to our relationship with God. Paul makes this abundantly clear in Galatians.

Galatians 5:4-5 NKJV

You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. ⁵ For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.

Galatians 5:4-5 NLT

For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, you have been cut off from Christ! You have fallen away from God's grace. ⁵ But we who live by the Spirit eagerly wait to receive by faith the righteousness God has promised to us.

Galatians 5:4-5 AMP

If you seek to be justified and declared righteous and to be given a right standing with God through the Law, you are brought to nothing and so separated (severed) from Christ. You have fallen away from grace (from God's gracious favour and unmerited blessing). ⁵ For we, [not relying on the Law but] through the [Holy] Spirit's [help], by faith anticipate and wait for the blessing and good for which our righteousness and right standing with God [our conformity to His will in purpose, thought, and action, causes us] to hope.

Summary: Put your trust in and receive God's free lunch (His grace). Realise that God's thinking (grace) is the opposite of man's sinful nature thinking (law/works). Walk according to the Spirit, and experience the abundant life of love, joy, peace, and full contentment.

"I must learn to recognise that if I have a hard and unforgiving heart, have expectations on others, am ungrateful, and/or get angry with others when they let me down, then I have a works based attitude. I must repent before I can experience fellowship with God or others"

God justifies the ungodly—the ultimate demonstration of grace

v 5 **Him who justifies the ungodly**: This is amazing grace; look at who God justifies—***the ungodly!*** This would have to be *the most counter intuitive statement in the whole Bible*. It goes against all human logic and reasoning. Remember that to justify someone means to declare them innocent of all wrongdoing. So logically, a just and holy God should only justify, or declare innocent, the one who has no sin.

So why does God do this? There is only one reason, and it isn't because God loves sin, or is an unjust judge who is apathetic towards sin. God chooses to justify the ungodly, those who are sinners and the avowed enemies of God, do demonstrate His gracious and unconditional love towards us—*But God shows and clearly proves His [own] love for us by the fact that while we were still sinners, Christ (the Messiah, the Anointed One) died for us.* (Romans 5:8 AMP)

Romans 5:6-10 AMP

While we were yet in weakness [powerless to help ourselves], at the [right] time Christ died for (in behalf of) the ungodly. ⁷ Now it is an extraordinary thing for one to give his life even for an upright man, though perhaps for a noble and loveable and generous benefactor someone might even dare to die. ⁸ *But God shows and clearly proves His [own] love for us by the fact that while we were still sinners, Christ (the Messiah, the Anointed One) died for us.*

⁹ Therefore, since we are now justified (acquitted, made righteous, and brought into right relationship with God) by Christ's blood, how much more [certain is it that] we shall be saved by Him from the indignation and wrath of God.

¹⁰ For if **while we were enemies** we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, it is much more [certain], now that we are reconciled, that we shall be saved (daily delivered from sin's dominion) through His [resurrection] life.

“It isn't as if God is *happy* with our **ungodly** condition. We are not justified *because* of our ungodliness, but *despite* our ungodliness.” (David Guzik)

“The paradoxical phrase, *Him who justifies the ungodly*, does not suggest that justification is a fiction, whether legal or of any other sort, but that it is a miracle” (Denney). The miracle is that God would choose to love His enemies, those who want nothing to do with Him, and hate Him so much that they would crucify Him.

“If at any time you are tempted to doubt God's love for you, just remember that *God justifies the ungodly.*”

All people can be declared righteous by faith

Romans 4:5 NKJV

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness

v 5 **But to him who does not work**: “Who does the Lord justify? Who gets blessed? Not the Pharisee, but the one who realises he's worthy of nothing” (Jon Courson)

Luke 18:9-14 NKJV

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself [cut off from God’s grace—out of fellowship with God], ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ ¹³ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

v 5 **His faith is accounted for righteousness:** Paul has just finished telling us that Abraham was accounted as righteous because of His faith. Now, Paul opens it up for everybody—**“But to him who but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness”**. Paul is saying that what is true for Abraham, is also true for everyone.

John 3:14 NKJV

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up [crucified], ¹⁵ that **whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life**. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that **whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life**.

“It is not the one who has faith in his faith, but the one who has faith in the goodness, the provision, and the loving-kindness of the Lord who is righteous. Such is the one to whom the Father says, “Because you’re not trying to earn My favour or earn My blessing, because you’re just believing in who I am as the Justifier of the ungodly, I pronounce you righteous”” (Jon Courson)

3. Oh the joy of living by faith in God and not by works

Romans 4:6-8 NKJV

Just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: ⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.”

Romans 4:6-8 NLT

David also spoke of this when he described the happiness of those who are declared righteous without working for it: ⁷ “Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight. ⁸ Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of sin.”

v 6 **Just as David also describes:** Paul now uses another Jewish hero of the faith—king David. David was guilty of adultery and premeditated murder. He knew that the penalty according to the law was death. He was hiding his sin for over a year—his heart being hard as stone and cold as ice. But once David humbled himself and confessed, what did God do for him even before the words came out of his mouth?

2 Samuel 12:13 NKJV

So David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.” And Nathan said to David, “The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die.”

Psalm 32:1-5 NLT

Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight!

² Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty!

³ When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long.

⁴ Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat.

⁵ Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the Lord." And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone.

"No sinner, and try he ever so hard, can possibly carry his own sins away and come back cleansed of guilt. No amount of money, no science, no inventive skill, no armies of millions, nor any other earthly power can carry away from the sinner one little sin and its guilt. Once it is committed, every sin and its guilt cling to the sinner as close as does his own shadow, cling to all eternity unless God carries them away." (Lenski)

v 6, 8 **To whom God imputes righteousness apart from works ... blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin:** We come back to the idea that God's righteousness is credited or imputed to our account. Just like a rich man can impute or credit or transfer a billion dollars into my account, so God can impute or credit or transfer His own righteousness to my moral bank account. God's righteousness is given—it's a gift. It cannot be earned.

1 Corinthians 5:21 NKJV

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

"In the Psalm quoted (Psalm 32:1–2), David speaks of the blessedness, *not* of the one who is justified through works, but of the one who is cleansed through *imputation*. This is centred on what God places upon us (the righteousness of Jesus), not on what we do for God." (David Guzik)

Conclusion: The difference between works and grace

By definition, a work is anything we do, say, or think which is not motivated by love; it is done *only for boasting rights*, and therefore "**it profits me nothing**"—God's love for us has been forgotten and we are relying on our own effort and imagined goodness to try to make ourselves acceptable to others and to God. This is so important to understand. *Grace* is based on a humble realisation of our own depravity, which causes us to understand that God's love and favour towards us is both completely undeserved, and not able to be earned. *Works*, on the other hand, is based on a prideful and self-focused mindset or attitude. We forget that without God we have nothing and are nothing, and become deceived into thinking that we can be good enough to earn His favour—"Let no one deceive himself" (1 Corinthians 3:18a NKJV).

Grace and love go hand in hand—they are evidence of walking in the Spirit. In contrast, works and a cold and prideful heart go hand in hand—they are evidence of walking according to our sinful nature. Again, anything done which is not motivated by love is a work, something we do to try to earn or merit something. In contrast, anything done which is motivated by love demonstrates a heart that is overcome by wonder that God could love them so much that He would send His Son to die in their place. Think again about what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. There are many things listed there that we are tempted to boast about—great faith, great sacrifice, great gifting, great understanding, and great talking, but done with a prideful and loveless works based attitude, *I am nothing, and it profits me nothing*.