

**FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE:  
THE SIGN OF BELONGING TO GOD'S COVENANT FAMILY**

Jerry Truex; March 20, 2011

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## Introduction

The theme for Lent 2 is faithfulness, both God's faithfulness and human faithfulness. Today, we are going to trace Paul's argument in Romans 1-4, which is the most extensive treatment of faithfulness in the Bible.

### A. Paul's Thesis (Rom. 1:16-18)

#### 1. God's Salvation

At the beginning of Romans, Paul gives a summary of what Romans is about. It's his thesis statement.<sup>1</sup>

**Rom. 1:16-18.** <sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith[fulness], to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith[fulness] for faith[fulness]: as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith[fulness]." <sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. (NRSV)

Paul argues that the power of God's salvation—the righteousness of God<sup>2</sup>—is being manifested to the whole world—Jews and Gentiles—to those who are faithful (1:16).<sup>3</sup>

God's salvation power is revealed through the faith(fulness) of God/Christ and through the faith(fulness) of humans who respond (1:17).

#### 2. The obedience of faith

What is faith (*pistis*) for Paul? For Paul faith is synonymous with faithfulness, loyalty to God, and obedience to God (1:5; 15:18; 16:26).

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Toews, *Romans*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 2004) 50-59 argues that all three verses, verses 16-18, constitute Paul's thesis statement, whereas almost all other commentators limit the thesis to verses 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> "God's covenant justice." N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone, Romans: Part One, Chapters 1-8* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 9, 14-14. Wright explains that if God made the world, why do bad things happen? God's revelation of covenant justice (righteousness) addresses that. God calls a single family (Abraham's), enters into a covenant (agreement) with them, and promises that through Abraham's family God will "bring his rescuing justice to the world." Wright states, "God's covenant with Abraham was always intended as the means by which the creator God would rescue the whole world from evil, corruption and death" (his emphasis).

<sup>3</sup> Toews, *Romans* (2004) 52.

**Rom. 1:5.** Through whom [Christ] we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith (hupakoēn pisteōs; ὑπακοήν πίστεως) among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name. (NRSV),

As you can see, Paul's purpose is to bring about "the obedience of faith." Notice that faith and obedience goes together; they are interchangeable for Paul.<sup>4</sup> Whenever we read the word "faith" (*pistis*) in Paul, it usually means *faithful obedience* or *obedient faith*.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. God's wrath

In addition to God's salvation power, which is experienced by the faithful or obedience, God is also revealing divine wrath for those who are unfaithful or disobedient.

## B. Humanity's Problem: Idolatry & SIN (1:18–3:20)

In the first major section of Romans, Paul begins to prove his thesis statement by appealing to human experience: Humanity's problem of idolatry and SIN.

When people reject God and don't worship of the Creator, but instead worship of the creature, bad things happen to human beings.

### 1. Idolatry and its consequences

When people turn away from God as the center of their lives—which is the classic definition of idolatry—what happens?

**Rom. 1:28-32.**<sup>28</sup> And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.<sup>29</sup> They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips,<sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents,<sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.<sup>32</sup> They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die-- yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. (NRSV)

Notice that God does not punish people for disobedience or harmful behavior; rather disobedience and harmful behavior is the *result* of turning away from God.

<sup>4</sup> Article Four of the *Schleitheim Confession of Faith* (1527), written by Michael Sattler, states in Article Four: "Since all who do not walk in *the obedience of faith*, and have not united themselves with God so that they wish to do His will, are a great abomination before God, it is not possible for anything to grow or issue from them except abominable things. For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who [have come] out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial; and none can have part with the other.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans* (2004) 1 and 4, who translates the phrase ὑπακοήν πίστεως (Rom. 1:5) as "believing obedience." The phrase suggests that *only the person who is obedient can have faith or believe*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Original 1937; London, SCM, 1959) 47.

For example, “envy, murder, strife, etc.” is not the cause of Gods’ wrath, but the consequences of human rebellion against God. There is a three-fold pattern of not honoring God to judgment to consequences.

	NOT HONORING GOD	JUDGMENT	CONSEQUENCES
1:22-24	v. 22—claiming to wise, they exchanged the glory of God for images ...	v. 24—therefore God gave them up	v. 24—to impurity, to degrading their bodies
1:25-27	v. 25—they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator	v. 26—therefore God gave them up	v. 26—to degrading passions, exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural
1:28-31	v. 28—they did not think to acknowledge God	v. 28—God gave them up	v. 28—to an unthinking mind and to things that should not be done
2:1-3	v. 32—who know the judgment of God, yet practice such things ...	v. 2:1—have no excuse	v. 2:2-3—your judgment condemns you

*Illustration:* Think of a parent and a child. The parent wants the child to play with the parent and the plastic play stove from Mattell. But the child turns away from the parent and touches the hot stove in the kitchen and singes her hand. Similarly, humans turn away from the truth of God and singe their soul and burn their relationships.

When people turn away from God toward something else (idolatry), it feels like God gives up on us and we are left to our own devices, which are quite destructive. The idea that *idolatry leads to immorality* is common in Jewish thinking (Psa. 106:19-23; Jer. 2:11; Wis. 12:23—14:27).<sup>6</sup>

## 2. SIN as power

Paul also argues that if people are not under the Reign of God—not faithful to God—they are under the power of SIN (3:9).

**Rom. 3:9.** What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin (hup’ hamarian; ὑφ’ ἁμαρτίας). (NRSV)

Paul talks about SIN as something the reigns, rules, and enslaves.<sup>7</sup>

- SIN misuses and distorts the “law” and it enslaves the “flesh”
- SIN is a power that draws all created reality into its “force field”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Paul talks about self-destructive harmful behavior as divine wrath.

<sup>7</sup> Toews, *Romans* (2004) 409-11.

- SIN is presented as a mythical or cosmological power that dominates and enslaves humans (3:9; 5:21; 6:12); the proof was given in Rom. 1:18-32!
- For Paul, human beings serve either SIN or the true God (6:15-23).
- SIN demands allegiance (6:20; 7:23) and its power must be broken (6:7; 8:10)

When people are under SIN as power, they commit sins (plural). Just as *faithful obedience* is a manifestation of being under God, so also *unfaithful disobedience* is a manifestation of being under SIN.

### 3. Judgment by works (2:6-11)

Paul also argues vigorously that divine wrath is impartial (2:11). It is proved by the fact that God judges by works (2:6-10). All people—are on equal footing. No one has an advantage. All people are judged by their works.<sup>9</sup>

**Rom. 2:6.** <sup>6</sup> For he will repay according to each one's deeds (κατὰ τὰ ἔργα)." (NRSV)

It is a fundamental principle of Early Judaism and Christianity that God will repay people according to works is.<sup>10</sup>

**Prov. 24:12.** "Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?" (NRSV)

**Matt. 7:21.** "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (NRSV)

If we live our lives in *faithful obedience* to God, we experience salvation now and in the future. If we live lives in *unfaithful disobedience*, we experience divine wrath.

*Notice that our experience of salvation or wrath is a natural consequence of our behavior. Our "deeds" or "works" matter.*<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Toews, *Romans* (2004) 91.

<sup>9</sup> If people are *faithful* to God, they receive blessing now and in the future. But, if people are *unfaithful* to the truth of God, they experience negative consequences now and in the future. That is why Paul says that God judges us by our works.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 62:11-12; prov. 24:12; Job 34:11; Jer. 17:10; Matt 7:21; 16:27; 25:31-46; John 5:28-29; Rom. 2:11; 14:12; 2 Cor. 10:11:15; Gal. 6:7-9; 2 Tim. 4:14; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 2:23; 22:12, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Does this contradict 3:20 and 28 where Paul says that God will justify people through faith and not according to works? There is no contradiction. First, "works of law" refer to symbols of Jewish ethnic identity and not "good work" as such; see James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, WBC, Vol. 1 (Waco: Word, 1988) lxiii-lxxii. Second, since "faith/fullness" (*pistis*) and "obedience" (*hupakoē*) are synonymous (1:5; 5:19; 15:18; 16:26), Paul can say that God judges our works or our obedience. For the believer, works or obedience is the outward expression of faith. In the unbeliever, works or disobedience is an expression of unbelief; see C.E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 150-51; Toews, *Romans* (2004) 408-09.

### C. God's Faithfulness (3:21-26)

Next, in Romans 3:21-26, Paul presents the divine solution to the humanity's problem—faithfulness. Some have said this "is possibly the most important single paragraph ever written."<sup>12</sup> The key verse is verse 22:

**Rom. 3:22.** The righteousness of God [has been revealed] through faith in/of Jesus Christ for all who believe. (NRSV).

**Rom. 3:22.** The righteousness of God [has been revealed] through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who are faithful. (JT)

Most English versions translated "faith in Jesus Christ," but it is better understood as "the faith(fulness) of Jesus Christ." The faith of Jesus Christ refers to Jesus' life of obedience to God, even to the point of death as a *sacrifice of atonement* (3:24).

God demonstrates that He is faithful through Jesus—Jesus healed, loved, fed, taught, and died as a matter of loyalty to God—this displays God's character.

This revelation is understood by all who are faithful. God's faithfulness displayed in Christ evokes human faithfulness in response.

### D. God's Inclusiveness (3:27-31)

At Romans 3:27-31, Jews listening to Paul's argument would probably object: "We Jews keep the Law of Moses. We are God's elect people. We have privileged status. We don't need Jesus' atonement. Our relationship or covenant with God is based on our keeping the Law of Moses—especially circumcision, dietary practices, and Sabbath keeping."

Paul rejects that idea. Cleverly, he appeals to Moses' foundational principle, namely, monotheism, to show that God does not show favoritism to anyone.

**Rom. 3:28-30.** <sup>28</sup> For we hold that a person is justified [made right] by faith[fulness] apart from works prescribed by the law. <sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, <sup>30</sup> since God is one; and he will justify [make right] the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. (NRSV)

#### 1. Monotheism

God is impartial on the basis of monotheism. ONE GOD is God of all peoples. One God does not have two faces; one for the Jews and one for non-Jews. Both Jews (who keep laws like circumcision) and non-Jews (who do not) are *justified or made right*

<sup>12</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 173.

(δικαιοσύνη) by the same God by the same principle of *faithfulness* (πίστει) to the one God (3:28).

## 2. Justification

God is impartial because everyone—Jews and Gentiles—can be justified by their faithfulness. To be justified—which means to be declared right, made right, or set right with God—is covenant language. It means that a person is considered to be living faithfully within the bounds of God’s covenant. To be justified is to be a member of God’s covenant family.<sup>13</sup>

## E. God’s Covenant Family (Romans 4)

When we move into Romans 4, Paul continues to address the issue of how does one become part of God’s covenant family?

### 1. Based on ethnic identity? No.

Is the family of God based on ethnic identity or connections? Jews believed this to be true.

In Jewish tradition, Abraham was the model Jew that God rewarded. Abraham kept the law of circumcision (Gen. 17:11) and so God blessed him. Thereafter, all Jews kept circumcision to show they were members of Abraham’s family and therefore God’s family. So Paul raises the question.<sup>14</sup>

**Rom. 4:1-2.** <sup>1</sup> What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our ancestor according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified [set right with God] by works [of Moses’ Law], he has something to boast about, but not before God. (JT)

“Have we found Abraham to be our ancestor according to the flesh?” In other words, is the family, into which we are adopted, the ethnic (Jewish) or physical (circumcised) family of Abraham?<sup>15</sup> Paul rejects that idea.

### 2. Based on faith/fulness? Yes.

Paul offers an alternative interpretation. Membership in God’s family is based on faith(fulness) and God’s grace.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans* (2004) 65.

<sup>14</sup> Toews, *Romans* (2004) 118 argues that other translations omit translating “to find” (*huerēkenai*; εὕρηκεναι) and suggests this is why other translations miss the two questions in verse 1. In agreement, N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans: Part 1, Chapters 1-8* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 64 translates the second question as “Have we found Abraham to be our ancestor in a human, fleshly sense?”

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans* (2004) 65-6.

Paul proves this by quoting Gen. 15:6, which emphasizes Abraham's faith as the basis for being part of God's family.

**Rom. 4:3-5.** <sup>3</sup> For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." [Gen. 15:6] <sup>4</sup> Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. <sup>5</sup> But to one who without works [of law like circumcision] trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith[fulness] is reckoned as righteousness. (JT)

***Faithfulness = righteousness = being in the covenant family of God.***

Notice that Abraham's faithfulness—his trusting, obeying, and believing—is equivalent to or consider to be righteousness (4:5). It is "the righteousness of faith" (4:13; δικαιοσύνης πίστεως).

When God considered or reckoned Abraham's faith(fulness) as righteous, Abraham was "in the right" with God.

In this way, Abraham becomes the model for how a person becomes a member of God's covenant family—by *obedient faith* or *faithful obedience* to God's grace.

According to Genesis, Abraham was the first member of God's family, not because he was circumcised, but because he was faithful.

### **3. Based on God gift**

Notice in verse 5, God justifies the ungodly. This is a gift of God (4:4). It's an act of God's grace. Who is the "ungodly" that Paul is talking about? It is Abraham.

Paul has in mind the tradition that Abraham was a typical pagan (ungodly), a typical non-Jewish Gentile! In other words, Paul is arguing that Abraham was a Gentile idolater when God was merciful and gracious to him.

When Abraham responded in faith to God and became the first member of God's covenant family (Gen. 15:6). Abraham was a believer before he was circumcised the sign of Jewish identity (Gen. 17:11).

Paul is making the point that both Gentiles and Jews become members of God's family the same way—by *faith exactly as Abraham did himself*.<sup>16</sup>

## **F. Summary**

The faithfulness of Jesus Christ reveals that God is righteous and faithful to His covenant promises to Abraham. God is fair to everyone. Even though everyone is

<sup>16</sup> Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans* (2004) 67-68.

under the power of SIN, God justifies people or set right by grace working through their own human faithfulness.

Paul uses Abraham as an example. God set Abraham in a right relationship with Himself on the basis of his faithfulness. Everyone who imitates Abraham's faith becomes a member of God's covenant family.

To be a member of God's family is:

1. To be faithfully obedient to God
2. To have sins forgiven
3. To be liberated from SIN as power
4. To live in right relationship with God, others, and one self
5. To be justified or declared righteous