***Gifts and Debts are Mutually Exclusive
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We are currently studying Romans 4:1-8, which deal with Old Testament salvation.

**Legalism**

Legalism, as you well know, is a system of religion seeking to gain salvation, and to gain God's blessing, by means of human works. It is indeed a very terrible thing if a person is in doubt concerning his salvation. You may not feel the concern often in the days of your good health. You may not feel the concern in the days of your youth. But there comes a time in the experience of people when they actually come to the threshold of going to the other side – of crossing the river, and moving from this life to the life in the presence of God. When you suddenly find yourself with that potential before you, then it becomes very important to know for a certainty what you're going to find on the other side. The average person, functioning on the basis of legalism, which means trying to meet God on the basis of his own merits, never has any real comfort or assurance. There's always a great doubt.

People who go to churches that tell them that their relationship to God is structured upon certain rituals being performed, such as water baptism; participating in the Lord's Supper; or, observing holy days – those people are never sure what they're going to find when they cross the river into the presence of God.

So, legalism is a desperate, desperate gamble to try to make it with God. And what Paul is trying to do is to give people assurance that they have a line of relationship to God which is going to exist after they cross the river of death; and, that they may rest fully assured that God's grace has provided eternal life for them now, and that God's grace is going to carry them right up to the threshold of death, so that they will die in grace, which means that they will die with dignity, and they will die with a joy of anticipating the promotion which they are about to experience.

Don't forget that that's what death is for the Christian. Death for the Christian is pinning another promotion on your shoulder, and putting another bar on your shoulder. It is moving you up in God's program – not out.

So, legalism, this system of religion of seeking to gain salvation or to gain God's blessing, is a thing that comes straight out of hell, and is a creation of the mentality of Satan.

The Jews were trapped in this. They were trapped in such works as circumcision and keeping the Mosaic Law for salvation. Today, people count on a similar program of works through such things as water baptism or living by the Golden Rule. Christians even try to keep salvation by observing certain taboos, and thinking that in this way they can gain God's blessing as a believer. But legalism is a totally false basis of seeking to relate yourself to God – before or after salvation.

We have covered this ground very thoroughly in the Philippians series of studies, and you might want to review the recordings on that. But here in Romans 4, the apostle Paul is showing from Jewish history that no Old Testament saint was ever saved by works, because if he were, that would give them a ground for boasting. We've already seen that. One of God's principles is that nobody can boast in salvation, and nobody can boast in the accomplishments of his Christian life.

**Abraham**

Abraham is the great example. He is the Father of the Jewish nation. We find that the Bible tells us that he was saved by faith. He believed God's promises to him. Abraham's faith was evidenced by the fact that he always looked forward to the future fulfillment of those promises. He had full confidence that God had spoken the truth to him. God would save him. God would give him a great nation and a great posterity, and He would make him and his people a great blessing to all the world. Abraham believed it, and they looked forward ultimately to that city with God in heaven. And God, because of this, imputed absolute righteousness to Abraham on the basis of his trust alone in the Lord.

The apostle Paul has met the challenge which might arise against a statement of this nature, because the Jews would have said, "Well, that's ridiculous. We know very well that our father Abraham was saved by the fact he did certain things that God told him to do, so God said, 'OK, you're born-again.'"

So, Paul, therefore, goes to the Scriptures with which no Jew could argue, for the Scriptures, having spoken, are indeed the Word of God, and that settles it.

In the last session, we looked at Genesis 15:6, and we saw that there Abraham was declared in the Old Testament to have been justified by faith. So, Paul proves his claim in verse 2 that Abraham was not saved by works, and therefore had no occasion for boasting.

**It is not a Reward for Works**

Now, in verse 4-5, which we begin with today, here in Romans 4, Paul sums up the spiritual principle which has been illustrated and demonstrated by Abraham's experience, and that is that justification is not a reward. So verse 4 says, "Now to him that works, the reward is not reckoned of grace, but of death." The word "now" in the Greek is this word "de." It introduces a contrast here of salvation by grace and salvation by works. It is introducing a general principle. Here is a thing now that Paul says that you can hang your mind on. Here's a thing that you can count on that is absolutely true with God. So, he introduces it with the word "now."

"To him that works" is this word "ergazomai." "Ergazomai" means "human effort. It refers here to the person who is trying to be justified before God by means of some good works of his: by means of his morality; by means of observing certain taboos; by means of certain self-denial; by means of certain words that he repeats like prayers; by means of certain rituals which he performs; or, by whatever a human being can do, totally apart from God. This refers to human good production: "To him that works" means "to him that is functioning on his old sin nature" – who is working from the strong side of his old sin nature that is producing human good, but which, nevertheless, in God's eyes, is an evil thing.

This is in the present tense, which means the constant approach of the old sin nature to salvation is to work. Everybody wants to work for salvation. It is in the middle voice, but it has an active meaning in this particular word. It has an active meaning, which means that the person himself is doing the achieving. It is a participle because we have a principle stated here.

This is a principle concerning the person who is working. This is a broader principle than just salvation. This has to do with what you are going to do tomorrow morning when you report into your place of work, when you punch a time clock – whatever you do. In your place of employment, this principle is the one that applies. Paul is speaking of a general principle that is true – an axiom which he then applies to the specific issue of personal salvation.

The principle is that the person who works, and the person who performs certain functions, then has before him what Scripture calls a reward. The Greek word is "misthos," and it actually means "wages." A person has wages. A person has a right to some return because he worked for it.

He's going to apply this here, of course, to justification, and his point is that justification can never be a payment for anything of human achievement. But here, the word "misthos" means wages because you have earned it.

He denies all this with the word "not," and he uses that strong Greek negative "ou," so that he is declaring that this is not true: "Now to him that has put out some effort and some service the wages are not reckoned." The word "reckoned" is "logizomai." "Logizomai" means "to put to one's account." The wages are not put to your account. What you put into the bank as a result of your daily labors is not the result (he is going to point out here) of grace. It's not the result of the fact that it's a gift from your employer, but it's the result of something entirely different. If you work; if you perform a service; or, if you perform a function that has a value upon it, then you will receive a wage. But that wage is not put to your account. This is present tense. This is always true in the business world.

**Unmerited Favor**

It's middle voice, but again, this one has an active meaning. It is not something that is done by your employer. It's indicative – a statement of fact about work and wages. This is not done "according to." "Kata" is the word. "On the basis of" is the idea: "On the basis of grace (‘charis’)." “Charis" means a gratuitous gift. It's just a gift. This is just as if someone were to walk up to you today and say, "I want to give you a gift. Here's $5. Go buy yourself something. That is a gratuitous gift." It is not something that the person is giving to you because you performed a service for him, and therefore he is paying you wages. *This is unmerited favor.* That's how we usually refer to it.

This is the concept that is involved in Ephesians 2:8-9, where Paul says, "For by grace (by the gratuitous gift) of God you are saved, through faith, and not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast. There the concept is very clearly spelled out.

Then in Titus 3, the apostle Paul stresses this concept again several times. You have an in Titus 3:7: "That being justified by His grace." This is the same word: by His unmerited favor; and, by His gratuitous gift: "Being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

In verse, 5 he says it again: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, he saved us; by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit."

Verse 7 says, "It is justified by grace." Verse 5 says, "It is not by works."

Then in Titus 3:8, we read, "This is a faithful saying. And these things I will that you affirm constantly, that they who have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men." Notice the progression here. Verse 7 says, "A man is justified by grace." It is just a gift of God. Verse 5 says the opposite (the negative): "You are not justified by your own works." Then verse 8 says, "But I do want to make it clear to you that your works are important." So, Paul says, "Affirm it constantly that they who believed in God (and so they *are* justified) might be very careful." That means that you have to think about this. You have to plan it. You have to stress this to yourself. You have to organize your life to do this.

If you don't organize your life to perform good works, you will not do it. As we say in the Berean Youth Clubs, Christian Service means not doing something else. If you are going to serve in the youth clubs, that means you are not going to do something else. But that is the basic principle of earning rewards in heaven. It means not doing something else. It means not doing something else with your money, or with your time. It means not doing something else with your capacities. To maintain good works, these things are good and profitable unto men.

So, the principle that Paul is laying out here is that if you go to work for somebody, and you produce a service or a product that has a value, then you will receive a wage for that. But you are to understand that that wage that you receive is not as the result of a gift which is coming to you from that person. Then he says, "But." And this is the word "alla," which is a contrast between gift and debt. It says "But of," and again, it's the word "kata" ("on the basis"). It is on the basis of debt.

**Debt**

The word "debt" looks like this in the Greek: "opheilema." "Opheilema" means "what is legally due." The result of your labors bring you a monetary reward, but that is what is legally due to you, and that's how you can translate this. What is due. It's earned by your works.

**Gifts and Debts are Mutually Exclusive**

Now, God never saves anybody on the basis of earning justification. So, what's the general principle of verse 4? It is simply this. It declares that gifts and debt are mutually exclusive. If somebody gives you a gift, they have to do it apart from anything that you have done for them. If somebody pays you wages, it is not a gift. It is the result of what you have earned by something that you have done.

This principle is very important, because a lot of people who are sincere people, and who are church people, who are going to take themselves right into hell because some idiotic preacher led them into the notion that you can mix gifts and debts; and, that somehow salvation can be a gift of God, and at the same time you can do something to earn it. And God says, "No, no, 1,000 times, no. If it's a gift, it can't be earned. And if it's earned, you get the opposite: it is not a gift."

Now, if the Bible tells us, "By grace you are saved by a gift of God, as the result of your faith, and then it puts the negative in, and says, "Not of works, because I'm not going to let anybody boast," what do you think you're going to end up doing to yourself if you're going to be saved through your water baptism; if you're going to be saved through your observance of the Lord's Supper; if you're going to be saved through the observance of circumcision, or any other ritual of the Mosaic Law? If you pursue that line of trying to make it with God, you have excluded yourself from the grace of God. That's the horrible point of this principle in verse 4. You have excluded yourself from the grace of God.

That's a terrible thing to do as an unbeliever. All the while you're trying to make it with works, you have slammed the door on salvation for yourself, because you can't get to grace. Gifts and debts are mutually exclusive. You have one or the other. This is the only way that God deals with human beings. You either deal on the basis of gift or you deal on the basis of debt, but you cannot have them both. They cross each other out – one way or the other.

Moving from that general principle, Paul goes to verse 5. Now he's going to apply this general principle of verse 4 to the specific issue of salvation (justification): "But to him that does not work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." The word "but" is the Greek word "de." It contrasts grace salvation with wages salvation. The word "to him that works" is again this word "ergazomai." It is the same as we had up in verse 4. This refers now to the person who is not trying to earn salvation by offering any meritorious works of his own. This time, it has the word "not" again. It's the negative "me," which is the kind of negative that generally goes with participles. This is present tense. This means that this person that we're talking about now never tries to approach God on the basis of his merits. It has an active meaning, though it has the middle form here. The person's chosen approach to God is: "God, do it for me." It's a participle. A principle is being stated.

"To him that does not work, but." Again, the word "but" is "de," just like you had at the beginning of the sentence. It is the same two words in Greek. The word "but" introduces the result of seeking justification apart from works: "But believes." And the word "believe" is our old friend "pisteuo," which means, of course, "to trust." The present tense means this is a constant condition and a constant relationship to God. The present tense is actually used, which generally means an action that continues. This is present tense used like a point action, yet it is constantly a present point action. They are believing. It is active. This is a positive volition choice on your part.

Indeed, we know that the doctrine of election teaches us that those who are born again are saved because God draws you to himself. On the other hand, the Bible makes it very clear that God never puts anybody into hell. The Bible says that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance and to eternal life. That is the point. This is what is God's purpose. This is what God's intention is. And God draws people to eternal life. But on the other hand, because He does not put anyone in hell, that indicates that there is human responsibility. Somehow involved with the sovereignty of God is the choice of man. Man chooses, and that's what "believe" means. Every subjunctive tense, which is a potential tense, means that it's possible. Every subjunctive tense that presents salvation on the basis of believing (in the subjunctive tense), is telling you to believe, but you may not believe. Every third class condition "if" in the Greek means maybe you will, and maybe you won't. This is like 1 John 1:9. That indicates that there is a human choice and a human responsibility. God's sovereignty is there, but so is man's choice.

If you are a mature Christian, you will not swing over to either side. You won't say, "Well, it's all sovereignty. It's just what God's going to do. We don't send missionaries. If they're going to be saved, they're going to be saved." Nor do you swing to the other side and say, "Well, it's all man's free will. God has nothing to do with it. You can do it. It's up to you." Somehow they're related.

Here is this word "believe," and it is active voice, and it means: "You, the sinner, have taken a move of your will. You have taken a positive volition position, and you have believed the gospel. It is participle. A principle is being stated here: "But believes on Him that justifies." The word "on" is the Greek word "epi," which indicates direction – where your believing is going. "On Him that justifies" is our word "dikaioo" again, which means to declare credited with absolute righteousness – to be declared credited with absolute righteousness. "Dikaioo" is that keyword for justification – to be declared righteous. And that's what this is. It is present. Justification is constantly supplied. Once God declares you righteous, you're always that. It is active because it's the action of God. He does the declaring. It is participle. It is again a principle. The God who justifies (who declares one in possession of absolute righteousness). Who?

**Deliberately Violating God's Standards**

Well, of all people, he uses the word "asebes" in the Greek. Our translation here in the King James has "the ungodly," but it's little more than that. It really means not simply that a person is not religious. This is a very strong word. "Asebes" is a very strong word in the Greek. It means that a person is not just irreligious. It means that a person is deliberately violating God's standards. It means that this is a person who is absolutely impious. This is a person that if God says, "Don't be guilty of fornication," he says, "I'm going to fornicate all I can." This is a person that, if God says, "Do not take My name in vain, and use My name in curse words," he says, "I'm going to foul up the air with everything I can in anybody's presence with the name of God in curse words." This is the person who, when God says, "Do not bear false witness," he says, "I'm going to lie if I'm going to go buy a pound of coffee at the Safeway. My wife may say, "Where are you going?" And I'm going to tell her, "I'm going to the A&P. I'm just going to lie because God says, 'Don't do it.' I'm going to violate everything He says. I'm fighting Him."

So, this word "asebes" is the grossest and the vilest kind of person that you can imagine. He's not just an irreligious character. He is a downright vile impious character, deliberately standing himself up against God's standards. It refers to something more than somebody who doesn't happen to belong to a church. This refers to a person who not only has no sympathy with God's standards, but deliberately has taken the course of action to violate those standards.

Can you imagine a God who says, "I'm taking into heaven an 'asebes?'" I'm not taking a fellow that's pretty nice. I'm not taking an honored person. I'm taking the lowest scum of humanity. That's what "asebes" stands for. It's the very strong Greek word that stands for "scum" – right down at the bottom. God wants to make it very clear that He operates on grace, and what grace really means – that dramatic, wonderful, shiny, terrific thing that God does for us. He saves us by grace.

**Faith**

So, God the Holy Spirit applies the principle that Paul has stated in verse 4 – that if you work for something, it can't be a gift, and if it's a gift, you can't have worked for it. And he applies it to verse 5, in the words: "But to him that does not work, but believes" – the person who does not try to face God on his works, but instead on trusting on Him (the God who justifies). This is the lowest scum of humanity, and the God who justifies the ungodly person, in all of his godliness – that person's faith. The word "faith" is "pistis," and it means "trust." That person's faith is counted ("logizomai" again), meaning to put to one's account. That person's faith is put to his account. It refers to something that is given to him as a gift, not a payment forever. It is present tense. God always will put this to the account of a person who comes to Him in faith.

You needn't come and tell us that you can't believe in Jesus Christ as Savior, because the Bible has made it clear that the truth of the matter is you won't believe – not that you can't believe. God says that you can come to Him and say, "I want eternal life. I want to spend eternity with You." If you do that, you needn't stand around and say, "I wonder if I'm one of the elect. I wonder if I'm under the atonement." If you want to be born-again, God says, "Just come on. I'm ready to welcome you. It is present tense. God constantly credits this to the account. It is active meaning here. God does it. It is indicative – a statement of fact: "For unto ("eis"). The idea of this preposition is resulting in righteousness ("dikaiosune"). That means absolute righteousness. So, we say, "Resulting in imputed righteousness." That's the meaning here.

"But to him that does not work:" This is the person who is not going to try to approach God on his old sin nature works: "But instead believes on Him" (trusting upon God – the God who justifies and who declares absolutely righteous the scum of humanity). His trust is going to be credited to his account as absolute righteousness, resulting in imputed absolute righteousness.

So, Paul is saying that Abraham found justification on the only basis possible – faith in God's Word to save him and to promote him. There is no other way. There are some Bible scholars who feel that Romans 4:4-5 are the two greatest verses in all the Bible. That is because they put it in a nutshell the whole principle that Paul is teaching in this book. If you work for it, you've got wages coming. But if you'll not work for it, and not try to work for your relationship to God, but simply accept what He has provided in Jesus Christ, the result will be that you will be declared absolute righteousness.

**Response**

The Old Testament part of the Bible, we're told, is written in order to exemplify (to illustrate) spiritual principles. Anytime you and I sit in a church service, it is important that we realize that, after you have been instructed in the Word of God, there is one factor that rests upon you, and you alone; and, that is the factor of response. To every instruction in Bible doctrine, there is a response that God the Holy Spirit is prepared to lead you to make. I alert you to this because, very often, we do not pay attention to the response part as much as we should in our concentration on the information part. God's information is given to you in order for us to make a response.

So, the Old Testament is filled with illustrations of how we should respond to biblical principles. I want to call your attention to a historical example that would illustrate this response in the form of the time that the Jews had come out of Egypt and they, again, as was a fashion, murmured moment against God, and the Lord, in punishment, suddenly brought down out of the hills serpents (poisonous snakes) by the hundreds. They crawled over everything; into everything; and, under everything. You couldn't jump into your sleeping bag at night without a snake being in there with you. And if you were bitten, you died.

Suddenly, thousands of bodies were piled up in the camp of Israel, as people had been hit by these poisonous snakes, and they are dead. In a matter of a couple of minutes, they were dead. These were deadly snakes. This incident is referred to in John 3. I want to read verses 14-15 to you: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." Will you notice what follows John 3:15? The famous John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

This is the statement of the very principle that we have been studying that Paul has declared to us of salvation apart from human words, but by believing what God has presented and offered in His son. Will you notice that John 3:16 is preceded by the illustration of the bronze serpent that Moses raised in the wilderness as the solution for the plague of snakes from which people were dying in the camp that day: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness." There is the historical example illustrating: "So must the Son of Man be lifted up on the cross, that whosoever looks to Him, and believes in Him, should not perish, but have eternal life." This is just as the people were told that if they looked upon this bronze snake, they would not die.

Then comes the declaration of John 3:16. This story is found in Numbers 21:5. We read, "And the people spoke against God and against Moses." They were complaining, not only against their leader Moses, but they were badmouthing God Himself: "Wherefore, having You brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread; neither is there any water; and, our souls loathe this light bread." These people are complaining against God's treatment of them since he brought them out of Egypt. They're saying whining: "Why have you brought us out of Egypt? To die in the wilderness?" No, you idiots, God brought you out of Egypt to give you freedom. And He has given it to you, and He demonstrated it by bringing you across the Red Sea when Pharaoh and his troops were barreling down on you, and He brought you through safely.

They say, "There is no bread here. There's no water." Well, they did have something to eat. They had manna, and look what they say about it: "And our soul loathed this light bread. We like that kind of bread we used to have back in Egypt, which was mixed with garlic and onions and all that good stuff. We hate this bread, this manna, that God gives us every day." And they did have water. When they needed water, God provided them with water. They had food. They had traveled from the Red Sea to the borders of Edom. Their slave mentality is showing through here, and causing them to complain against God; against Moses; and, against the manna.

**Serpents**

"And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and many people of Israel died." God punish the Jews with this plague of poisonous snakes. Thousands died: "Therefore, the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against you. Pray unto the Lord that He take away the serpents from us.' And Moses prayed for the people. The people realized what was happening. They repent, and they go to Moses, and Moses goes to intercede before God.

Verse 8: "The Lord said unto Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole. And it shall come to pass that everyone that is bitten, when he looks upon it, shall live.'" God says to Moses, "All right, I'll tell you what I'll do. I want you to make a serpent. Make it out of bronze. Put it on a pole in the midst of the camp." The fiery serpents were still all over in camp. God said, "If somebody hops into his sack at night and gets bitten by a servant, have him get out of that sack; run outside; and, look upon this bronze serpent on this pole, and you'll be healed. Wherever you are in the camp, turn and look toward the bronze serpent, and you'll be healed."

"And Moses made a serpent the bronze, and put it upon a pole. And it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of bronze, he lived." And sure enough, people were bitten by the poisonous snakes. They looked at this bronze image of a serpent, and immediately they were healed.

Now, that's an absurd prescription. That's just absurd. I don't care if I did do it. It's absurd. You and I know very well that nobody is going to be healed by looking at the image of a snake, if he's snake-bitten. , you better get your snake bite kit out. You and I know very well that we're not so silly as to go out and take our kids up to the Wichita Mountains in Oklahoma (which we're about to do), and not only to warn them about the fact that there are rattlesnakes among those rocks, and that we act accordingly, but we are not going to go with a bronze rattlesnake on a pole to be set up in order that we can hold it in front of somebody in case he gets bitten. This is an absurd prescription, isn't it? And there were some people in Israel who probably thought just like that. They thought to themselves, "How dumb can you be? I've been bitten by a poisonous snake, and I'm going to look at one made of bronze, and that's going to help me?

However, the truth of the matter was that the people who followed this absurd prescription were the ones who lived, and those who didn't are the ones who died. God prescribed looking, and those who obeyed lived.

**No Human Remedy**

However, will you notice that there were certain things that God did not prescribe? There were certain things that He did not tell them to do.

**No Self-Remedies**

Number one: the people were not told to make a remedy for themselves. They would have gladly mixed up any kind of potion to put on the snakebite if God would have just given them the formula. And undoubtedly some probably tried something. But the point was that God was showing them that no human remedy was available for their sin. And that's what this represented. The serpent represented sin – the result of the sin bite, or the result of the death blow that their sin had brought upon them.

So, God was showing them that there was no human remedy. Their security (their life) was restricted only to a divine remedy. This is so with sin today. Human religions concoct all kinds of potions that we are to put upon ourselves in order to be saved. But the end of that is eternal death. Hell is full of the people who have had water baptism. Hell is full of people who have kept the Ten Commandments. Hell is full of people who have given their money to the Lord's work, and so on.

Notice that they were not told to come up with a remedy for themselves.

**No Helping each Other**

Point number two: they were not told to help each other. There was no solution for their sins with some kind of social welfare program. If anybody went running around the camp saying, "Oh, let me help you with your snakebite," in all likelihood, he was going to get bitten himself. They were not actually told to nurse each other. So, today, many, by their good works, in behalf of others, cannot save us from hell. No improvement programs can work to neutralize the evil of sin. And we are not going to be able to help each other to make it with God. We're not going to be able to give each other some ennobling thoughts that are going to help us to meet God in our sin. You and I cannot help each other.

**No Killing of the Serpents**

Number three: the people we're not told to try to kill the serpents. That would have been the most logical thing to do. Snakes are running all over the place. Kill them. Get a snake-killing party. Sometimes, in Oklahoma, the rattlesnakes get so plentiful, they have an annual kill-rattlesnake day. And they go out, and they kill the rattlesnakes. If you get a lot of people after an animal, you can really wipe them out. You could have certainly gotten them on the snakes. That would have been logical. But no, God didn't tell them to kill the snakes. There was no big snake-killing drive. The Jews simply had to admit that they were sinners, and to judge what they had done as evil.

It's interesting that we have no evidence, for example, that Noah did anything about the sin of his day. He warned the people that a flood was coming. He warned the people to turn to God. But he didn't get on them about all of the sexual and other immoral practices that were so prevalent among them: the murders; and, the violence that filled the countryside. He didn't get on any of that. Jesus and Paul didn't rush to crusade against the social order. You can't tell me that Jesus and Paul approved of slavery, but never do you have a whisper of anti-slavery statements from either Jesus or Paul. They were not trying to change the evils of society by some external means like governments try to do. They knew that it had to come from inside. They had to bring an internal change to make an external change.

So, today only God can fight sin, and He does that by changing people on the inside. So, they were not told to try to kill the problems externally.

**No Praying to an Image**

Nor were they told to try to pray to this bronze image. Today, salvation comes by believing the gospel, not by praying for it.

**No Offerings**

Point number 5. They were not told to bring an offering to the serpent image. Jews were not asked to do anything. They were just again asked to believe something. As the Jews looked to the serpent, so today we look to Jesus Christ on the cross, and Christ risen again. Any human gifts of the unbeliever brought to God are worthless. The only gifts God values are those that come to Him from a believer. So, they were not told to bring any offering to the serpent image.

They were not told to light candles, or to perform any ritual whatsoever before him. They simply were told to look on him – an act of faith in what God had said.

**No Relics**

Point number 6: they were not told to secure a relic from the serpent, and to carry it around. That seems logical to a lot of people. Great religious institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church have always been collecting relics. There isn't anything that the Roman Catholic Church gets sweaty about, like a bone from an apostle, for example. That would be something terrific. If you can find a leg bone from an apostle, you really have something. And during the Crusades in the Middle Ages, when the Catholic Christians were swarming into the Muhammadan countries in order to reconquer them for Christianity, the smart Arab traders caught on to this obsession for religious relics. So, they kept selling to the crusaders parts of the cross that they had been preserving, and relics of parts of the bodies of saints. When the Crusades were over, there were mountains of wood from the cross, and mountains of bones from the 12 apostles. There were mountains of relics of every kind – skulls and whatnot, because people thought there was something sacred. Even if it was the head (the skull) of the apostle Paul, it wouldn't be worth anything, except on Halloween perhaps.

These people were not told to secure some kind of relic. Religion loved this magical procedure. It's popular and primitive. It's popular in civilized societies, because the old sin nature wants something concrete to hold onto, rather than an unseen God and His doctrine.

Now, for some reason, obviously, this plague stopped in time. And for some reason, they didn't destroy the brass serpent. For some reason, they kept it. When they broke camp, they carry this thing out with them. And it went for centuries circulating within the nation of Israel – this same bronze image. And it finally became the only thing it could become as a relic, and that is an object of worship.

So, in 2 Kings 18:4, hundreds of years after this plague, we finally have the records of their destroying this bronze serpent under the revival of King Hezekiah, one of the good kings of Judah. We read in verse 4 that: "Hezekiah removed the high places, the place of the immortal worship of the heathen cults. He broke down the images, and he cut down the idols. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made. For unto those days, the children of Israel did burn incense to it. And he called it Nehushtan. They were burning incense to it. The Roman Catholics would be proud to have this bronze serpent today. The people of India, with their worship, would be proud to have something like this today to burn incense to. Can you believe that the people of God, with the divine viewpoint of the Old Testament, for centuries had been doing this?

What was the value of this? The real value of the bronze serpent was as a visual aid to portray justification by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His atonement on the cross. We are born sinners into the human race, and we are dying spiritually because we have been bitten by the serpent of sin. Christ has been lifted up upon that cross as illustrated by the lifting up of this serpent. And He was raised upon that cross in order that we, who look to Him on that cross, dying in our behalf, might have eternal life.

So, 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "For He has made Him, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." Yet, the world is full of people who think that looking to Jesus Christ, hanging as their substitute upon the cross, is absurd, just like some people in Israel thought that looking to that bronze serpent was an absurd prescription.

So, in 1 Corinthians 1:18, we read, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness. But unto us who are saved, it is the power of God." To some people in Israel, looking at that bronze serpent was foolishness, but for those who looked, it was the power of life to them, because they were healed.

So, Romans 4:5 is simply saying that salvation by works does not work, but by faith in Jesus Christ, it does. The principle is stated in verse 4. If you work for it, it can't be of grace. It's a debt. The example (the application) to justification is stated in verse 5: "But to him that does not work, but believes on Him to justify the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.

I hope that perhaps today these two monumental verses will have added to your assurance concerning your future when you cross the river of death, and actually come down to facing God: not now, when you're feeling good; not now, when you have lots of plans in life; not now, when things are prospering for you; and not now, when you're young, and you have lots of years before you. But when you stand on the threshold, that's when you're going to have to know. You're going to have to know for sure. You're going to have to have a confidence, or you will not experience dying grace. You'll experience the most hellish kind of dying agony.

However, you need to remember these two verses. They state the principle that God says, "I don't want you to do anything, I just want you to receive something from Me, and then to become something through doctrine that I'm ready to make of you. If you believe that, and if you function on that, you'll have no question as to what awaits you out on the other side.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1977

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