

Appendix to *The Imputation of the Active Obedience of Jesus Christ*

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Interpreting Scripture with Nothing up My Sleeves

Have you ever seen a magician pull a rabbit out of a hat? If you have, you know that the hat seemed empty the moment before. When the magician sticks his hand into the hat he finds something that no one else could find. That is why he is the magician after all. But we all know that it is a trick. The magician had to smuggle the rabbit in from some unseen direction or trap door. The trick is to hide all of that and to make the rabbit appear “out of thin air.” Such magic tricks are great fun to watch! But our method of interpreting Scripture must not be like pulling rabbits out of hats. There should be no slight of hand and no smoke and mirrors. Our conclusions should be obvious and every step that we take to get there must be out in the open. Smoke and mirrors are for magic, not biblical interpretation.

Romans 4:4-8 has been trumpeted as a proof text for the imputation of the active obedience of Christ. We believe that the only way one can find the imputation of the active obedience of Christ in this passage is to pull a rabbit out of a hat. Since we do not believe the doctrine is actually in the text, we think it has to be smuggled in from the outside. Unlike the magician, well-meaning interpreters of Scripture are not intentionally trying to fool people. Their intentions are to faithfully interpret Scripture so as to better equip believers to serve God. But both the magician and the well-meaning interpreter are often doing the same thing—making something, a rabbit or a doctrine, appear “out of thin air.” My goal herein is to remove all of the smoke and mirrors and show you that I have nothing up my sleeves. I want to interpret this passage of Scripture as clearly as possible to show that a careful and ordinary reading of the text will not find the imputation of the active obedience of Christ in Romans 4:4-8, just as an ordinary hat does not contain a rabbit.

Romans 4:4-8 in Context

How does a sinful man get right with a holy God? Is it by obedience to the Law or by faith? How do we get the “righteousness” we need to be accepted by God? These are the questions that Paul pours all of his rhetorical powers into answering in Romans 3:20-4:12. Romans 4:4-8 plays an important role in this larger text where Paul explains the life-transforming message of justification that is the heart of the gospel. We have included the entire passage for you to read before we dive into our interpretation. We have done this to give you an overview of the argument before we walk you step by step through the details. You will notice that we have included a bit of Greek; don’t let it scare you! You don’t have to be a Greek scholar to see why what we have included is important. There is a root word that is woven throughout the passage that can easily be missed in translation. Words that are built upon the root **δικαι** (dikai) are used 18 times in these 25 verses. The noun **δικαιοσύνη** means righteousness and the verb **δικαιω** means to declare righteous, to recognize as righteous, or to vindicate, depending on the context in which it is used. The common theme in the whole passage is righteousness, which explains Paul’s repeated use of the word and its cognates:

²⁰Therefore no one will be declared righteous (**δικαιωθησεται**) in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. ²¹But now a righteousness (**δικαιοσυνη**) from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness (**δικαιοσυνη**) from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified (**δικαιουμενοι**) freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice (**δικαιοσυνης**), because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice (**δικαιοσυνης**) at the present time, so as to be just (**δικαιον**) and the one who justifies (**δικαιουντα**) those who have faith in Jesus.²⁷Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸For we maintain that a man is justified (**δικαιουσθαι**) by faith apart from observing the law. ²⁹Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰since there is only one God, who will justify (**δικαιωσει**) the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.³¹Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law. ¹What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? ²If, in fact, Abraham was justified (**εδικαιωθη**) by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. ³What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (**δικαιοσυνην**).” ⁴Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies (**δικαιουντα**) the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness (**δικαιοσυνην**). ⁶David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness (**δικαιοσυνην**) apart from works: ⁷“Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ⁸Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.” ⁹Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness (**δικαιοσυνην**). ¹⁰Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! ¹¹And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness (**δικαιοσυνης**) that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness (**δικαιοσυνην**) might be credited to them. ¹²And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (Romans 3:20-4:12).

Interpreting Romans 3:20-4:12

In the beginning of this passage Paul points out man’s need for righteousness. He immediately tells us about God’s wonderful provision of that righteousness. Paul then

defines exactly how this righteousness was acquired and how we can have a share in it. We will find that Paul never wavers or adds to the foundational statements he makes in the beginning of the passage. The law will not allow sinners to be declared righteous. Law can only point out sin and condemn sinners. Paul spends the first three chapters of the book of Romans, right up to 3:20, proving this point: “Therefore no one will be declared righteous (**δικαιωθησεται**) in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20).

In Romans 3:21-23, Paul tells us that God provides righteousness apart from law-keeping. This righteousness or justification is acquired by faith. The sinner trusts in Jesus Christ alone to gain this righteousness:

²¹But now a righteousness (**δικαιοσυνη**) from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness (**δικαιοσυνη**) from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:21-23).

As we consider the issue of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ in relation to this passage of Scripture, some questions naturally arise, such as, What are we to trust that Christ did for us? Where does our righteousness come from? Does it come from Christ’s perfectly obedient life, or from His sin-bearing death? In the verses that follow, Paul only mentions Christ’s sin-bearing death: “and are justified (**δικαιουμενοι**) freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.” Paul writes that justification, or being declared righteous in the court of heaven, comes through redemption. In Ephesians 1:7 Paul uses the term “redemption” in a similar context, but there he also defines the word: “In him we have **redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins**, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.” In Colossians 1:14 Paul writes something very similar: “in whom we have **redemption, the forgiveness of sins**.” One way to think about how we are justified is by thinking about how we are redeemed. The meaning of redemption in the context of spiritual salvation is forgiveness of sins. Paul tells us that the way one becomes “justified” is by being “redeemed.” That is, one is declared righteous in the court of heaven by having his sins forgiven via the substitutionary atonement of Christ. God poured out His wrath on Jesus Christ in our place so that we might be declared “righteous in His sight.” We place our faith in His blood, or in His sacrificial death, so that we can be considered “righteous.”

Verses 25 and 26 are concerned with God’s character. Specifically they are concerned with the justice of God in relation to His mercy on sinners:

²⁵He did this to demonstrate his justice (**δικαιοσυνης**), because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice (**δικαιοσυνης**) at the present time, so as to be just (**δικαιον**) and the one who justifies (**δικαιουντα**) those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:25-26).

God demonstrates His own “righteousness” by making sure sins are punished. Those who were saved before the New Covenant era went for many years without having their

sinful behavior duly punished. God demonstrated His justice or righteousness by pouring out His wrath on Jesus Christ for the sins of all who believe. God shows His justice in doing this by not simply winking at or ignoring sin; God declares men positively righteous by pouring out His wrath on Jesus, thereby being both just and the justifier. Notice that in verses 27 through 30 Paul continues to write about the same issue—how a sinful man can become righteous before God. The answer is still the same. We become righteous through *faith* in Christ’s sin-bearing death rather than by our own obedient observance of God’s *Law*; therefore we cannot brag that we have done something to earn God’s favor, as made clear in verses 27 through 30:

²⁷Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸For we maintain that a man is justified (**δικαιουσθαι**) by faith apart from observing the law. ²⁹Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰since there is only one God, who will justify (**δικαιωσει**) the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith (Romans 3:27-30).

There is only one God for both Jews and Gentiles, so there is only one way to be saved—through *faith*. It is not by Law observance or God would be the God of the Jews only, since they were the only ones who had God’s Law: “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God” (Romans 3:1-2).

If one could be saved by simply believing that a kind and loving God overlooks sin, then God’s law and his justice for transgressors by the unyielding standard of the Law would not be taken seriously. The Law would be nullified and God would be unjust. The Almighty would be a false-witness in His own court, setting up the lofty benchmark of the Mosaic Code as the presiding Judge and then mounting the witness stand to abrogate it with a whimsical “Oh never mind. I’m too nice for that sort of legalism.” Perish the thought! Our faith is in an objective event, the sin-bearing death of Christ that takes the demands of God’s law seriously. Paul makes clear that God has made a way for one to be righteous through the sin-bearing death of Jesus Christ. Those who accuse us of nullifying the Law should be applauding us for taking it so seriously: “Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law” (Romans 3:31).

As we make our way into Romans chapter four, it is important bear in mind that Paul is still writing about the same issue—namely, how can a sinful man can be considered righteous in God’s sight? Can one become righteous by what he does or must it be through believing in the atoning work of another? Paul laid out the answer for us at the beginning of this passage as shown above. We are justified or found righteous in God’s sight through redemption, which is the forgiveness of sin. This precious gift was purchased by the sin-bearing death of Jesus Christ. Nothing new is being introduced into the argument. In order to further explain his point (that justification is by faith in Christ’s work on the cross apart from any works that the sinner does), Paul considers how Abraham was declared righteous: “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified (**εδικαιωθη**) by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God” (Romans 4:1-2). The reader has no

reason to think that Paul is suddenly changing or appending the definition of “justify” or “righteousness” when he introduces Abraham.

In verses 3-5, the main point of the argument is to tell us that Abraham did not earn his righteousness through works. Paul is assuming that the reader has not completely forgotten all that has been said about righteousness. Paul is simply using different words to drive home the point that he already made in Romans 3:24—namely that justification, or the legal declaration of righteousness, is a gift: “and are justified (**δικαιουμενοι**) freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” God gave Abraham his righteousness through the instrument of faith in God’s promises:

³What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (**δικαιοσυνην**).” ⁴Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies (**δικαιουντα**) the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness (**δικαιοσυνην**) (Romans 4:3-5).

Many an able interpreter stumbles at this point by getting wrapped up in the question, “What does the term credit (**λογιζομαι**) mean?” It is true that this word was often used in financial transactions meaning, “to place into one’s account.” Many commentators then run with this verbal idea and conclude that righteousness cannot simply be forgiveness of sins because forgiveness of sins is *non-imputation*. Forgiveness is considering something bad (debt) in someone’s account as if it is not there, rather than placing something positive (wages) into someone’s account. They then conclude that a forgiven man is not necessarily a righteous man. If we follow these commentators down this dead end street, we will not be able to follow Paul’s argument. They are reading a theological assumption into the text. They assume that for something to be imputed it must be “positive” in some sense. Since, according to their view, forgiveness is not positive, it cannot be imputed. This, in our opinion, is an unbiblical conclusion. When Paul speaks of crediting or imputing righteousness, he is speaking about the fact that righteousness is a gift that God gives to sinners who place their trust in Jesus Christ. Remember, Paul’s purpose in writing about imputation is to show the difference between working for your salvation and having your salvation given to you. Paul unambiguously explains what righteousness is in chapter three. One is declared righteous by being redeemed or receiving the complete forgiveness of sins (past, present, and future) that is gained by faith in the sacrificial death of Christ. The use of the term “credit” or “impute” cannot turn all of this on its head. The purpose of the passage is to explain that righteousness, or forgiveness of sins, is a gift from God. God redeems sinners freely, rather than having them earn His acceptance by works.

Paul’s simple but profound argument continues with a straightforward Old Testament quotation about forgiveness of sins:

⁶David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness (**δικαιοσυνην**) apart from works: ⁷“Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ⁸Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him” (Romans 4:6-8).

Paul reaches back to Psalm 32 because it so beautifully restates the key idea that righteousness or forgiveness of sins is a free gift given by God to guilty sinners. Paul tells us in verse six that David is saying “the same thing” as he has been arguing. Once again we find that there is nothing new or complex here. It is wonderful, but it is not complicated. Paul wants us to understand and marvel at the free gift that we are given by believing in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on behalf of His people. To be righteous in God’s sight is to have one’s sins “forgiven,” “covered,” and “never counted against him.” To be forgiven is to be righteous and to be righteous is to be blessed.

Paul continues discussing the exact same point that he began to argue in the beginning of the passage and has focused on throughout this passage. He concentrates on the term “blessed” to continue the discussion about how a sinful man can be found righteous in God’s sight:

⁹Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited to him as righteousness (**δικαιοσύνην**). ¹⁰Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! ¹¹And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness (**δικαιοσύνης**) that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness (**δικαιοσύνην**) might be credited to them. ¹²And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (Romans 4:9-12).

Salvation is by faith alone, apart from works of the Law. Abraham was blessed (reckoned righteous, justified, or forgiven of all his sins) before he was circumcised. Abraham’s obedience in getting circumcised, or his obedience to any other law, did not *earn* Abraham anything. The law of circumcision was given to Abraham after the promise so that we might understand that righteousness is a gift that, by definition, can never be earned.

Every believer has unwittingly done some magic tricks as he has wrestled with Scripture. We have all unintentionally “smuggled” into our biblical interpretations some unbiblical presuppositions. The imputation of the active obedience of Christ is the “rabbit” that is often smuggled into the “hat” which is Romans 4:4-8. It is nowhere in the text, but well-meaning interpreters make the doctrine appear “out of thin air” as they interpret these verses. We all need to examine our presuppositions and our interpretations of Scripture with the utmost care. When we interpret Scripture, the goal is to do so with “nothing up our sleeves.”