

Romans 4:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that
justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.

Analysis

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Paul now states positively what he established negatively: the one not working (mē ergazomenō, μὴ ἐργαζομένῳ) but believing has faith credited as righteousness. The object of faith is crucial: ton dikaiounta ton asebe (τὸν δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἄσεβῃ, "the one justifying the ungodly"). This phrase would have been scandalous—Exodus 23:7 and Proverbs 17:15 explicitly condemn justifying the wicked. Yet Paul declares God does precisely this!

The resolution is Christ's substitutionary atonement: God maintains his justice by punishing sin in Christ, while simultaneously justifying sinners who trust in Christ. The "ungodly" (asebēs, ἄσεβής) are those without inherent righteousness, the impious—yet these are the objects of God's justifying grace. This is the gospel's scandal: God declares righteous those who are in themselves unrighteous, based on faith in the One who bore their sin. Abraham models this: he believed while still uncircumcised (v. 10), before proving his faith through Isaac (Gen 22).

Historical Context

Jewish theology distinguished between the righteous and the wicked, with God vindicating the former and judging the latter. For Paul to claim that God justifies the ungodly overturns this moral calculus—unless Christ's atoning death satisfies both divine justice and divine mercy. This would have been Paul's most

controversial claim: that Gentile sinners and Torah-less people could be declared righteous through faith alone.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. What does it reveal about the gospel that God justifies 'the ungodly' rather than rewarding the righteous?
2. How does this verse define what faith is—not meritorious work but trust in the God who justifies sinners?
3. Why is it so difficult for religious people to accept that justification comes to those who do 'not work' but believe?

Interlinear Text

τῷ	δὲ	μὴ	ἐργαζομένῳ	πιστεύοντι	δὲ	ἐπὶ	τὸν
G3588	But	not	to him that worketh	believeth	But	on	G3588
	G1161	G3361	G2038	G4100	G1161	G1909	
δικαιοῦντα	τὸν	ἀσεβῆ	λογίζεται	ἡ	πίστις	αὐτοῦ	
him that justifieth	G3588	the ungodly	is counted	G3588	faith	his	
G1344		G765	G3049		G4102	G846	
εἰς	δικαιοσύνην·						
for	righteousness						
G1519	G1343						

Additional Cross-References

Philippians 3:9 (Faith): And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:

Romans 3:22 (Faith): Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:

Romans 10:3 (Righteousness): For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.

John 6:29 (Faith): Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.

John 5:24 (Faith): Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

Romans 4:3 (Faith): For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.

Habakkuk 2:4 (Faith): Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.