

Romans 4:4-5

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No one can do sufficient good works so that God owes them. Everyone is sinful and cannot cause themselves to be in righteous standing before God. However, if we believe God, our faith is credited to us as righteousness, making us just before God.

Paul will now make a logical argument. If someone performs a job for an agreed-upon payment, the employer owes a debt of payment once the work is complete. The employer is not being generous in paying off the debt they owe. Paul asserts, logically: *Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due* (v 4). Someone can justly claim, “You owe me” if they have worked, and earned a wage. But Paul asks: Who can say, “God owes me?” What job has God asked us to do for payment? The expected answer is “None.” God never owes any human anything.

This is the flawed reasoning underlying legalism, which rests on the notion that God owes us if we perform. In the theme statement of Romans 1:16–17, Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4, that says the just (or righteous) person lives by faith (in God). Habakkuk goes on to say the contrast of living by faith, believing God’s ways are best, is to live in pride (faith in self). It is nothing but pride to assert that we can cause God to owe us in any way. God does not, nor ever will, owe any person anything. God is God. God’s very name is “I Am”—the essence of existence.

Paul’s detractors, the competing Jewish “authorities” who slandered Paul’s message (Romans 3:8), are prideful legalists. They believe that by following certain rules they can obligate God. Paul says, “No way,” God is not ever obligated. There is no true benefit that stems from pride. But there is good news, great news. There is immense benefit that comes from grace. God freely gives to humans the gift of being righteousness in His sight when we believe. That is what Abraham exemplifies. Abraham was the friend of God because he believed God, from beginning to end (Romans 1:17).

Paul offers a contrast to the idea that any person can obligate God to somehow be indebted to pay him or her: *But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness* (v 5). Note that within this statement lies an inherent notion that to believe that God justifies the ungodly, we must begin with the understanding that we are ungodly and in need of God’s mercy (Romans 3:23).

This recognition of sinfulness is just the opposite of an attitude that claims God owes us. If we believe we are better than most people (and therefore God will justify us), we fundamentally think God owes us because of how we compare to others. We can think we are justified before God because of how we (as judges) compare ourselves to others based on a standard of our own making. This is prideful rationalizing; it does not obligate God. God sets the standard and God does the judging, not us.

Paul previously made clear that every single one of us does not measure up to God’s standard (Romans 3:9–20). Every one of us is corrupt. The fact that one corrupt apple is less rotten than

another rotten apple does not make it edible. The first step in gaining the immense benefit of being justified before God, by God, is to recognize that we are ungodly and in need of God's mercy. The second step is to believe in God's mercy, that God will simply declare us as righteous if we believe, even though we are ungodly (John 3:14-15).

It is likely that this letter to the Roman believers is, in part, intended to support Aquila and Priscilla, who were fellow Jews who preached the gospel with Paul in Greece, and are now returned to Rome where they have started a church in their home (Romans 16:3-5; Acts 18:2, 18, 26). They are also teaching in defense of the gospel of grace against the legalists in Rome, and are facing fierce opposition from the Jewish "authorities" who are trying to make the gentile believers become Jews under the law. This contest is understandable, since Rome was the center of the political and cultural world at that time, which is why Paul writes so in depth about this issue of faith vs. works of the law. Neither he nor Priscilla and Aquila want to see the Roman believers yield to the legalists and live performatively to demand God's approval, because nothing can be demanded of God. It is by *faith* that *righteousness* is *credited* to any man or woman.

Biblical Text

4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,