

Romans: Faith and the Covenant Sign of Circumcision

Romans 4:9-12

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If you have your Bibles I would invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 4. We've said a number of times as we have continued to work through the book of Romans that there is no more important question that we could ask and answer than how can a man be right with God? What allows a man to stand before God without fear of condemnation? Paul is giving us an answer to that question as he sets the gospel before our eyes in Romans 3 and 4. In Romans 3, he sets forth that truth of the gospel and focuses on justification and explains what he means by justification by grace through faith. Then in Romans 4 he defends that teaching from the scriptures. That is, from the Old Testament. He shows that this teaching is not some new teaching that he has invented which has nothing to do with the law and the prophets. It's found right there in the Old Testament. He defends it, in fact, from the life of Abraham, and as we saw last week even from the writings of David. And he elaborates on certain aspects of what it means to be justified by grace through faith in Romans 4.

The last time we were together in Romans 4, verses 4 through 8, Paul focused in detail on the truth of imputation. That is, that in God's mercy He does not count against us our sins, and He does credit to our account, impute to us, reckon to us the righteousness of Christ as we trust in Him. And he speaks about that in verses 4 and 5 saying that Abraham himself was declared to be righteous and accepted by grace, by God's gift, by God's favor. Not because of anything that he had done, but because of God's grace he was accepted, reckoned or counted as righteousness.

And then in verses 6 through 8 Paul goes on to say, and by the way, David believed that. David understood that. David even taught and wrote about it, and he takes us right to Psalm 32, verses 1 and 2, where David says blessed is that man whom the Lord does not reckon his sins against him. And Paul says, "See, David understood the idea that we are not justified, we're not declared righteous by God because of something in us, because of our own righteousness, because of our own selves." We're reckoned as righteous because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, and even David understood that.

Today we come to Romans 4, verse 9. A section in which Paul explains the relationship between the old covenant sign of circumcision and saving faith and in that alien righteousness of Christ, which is granted to us in justification. Let's hear God's holy and inspired word:

Is this blessing then upon the circumcised or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised. That he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised. That righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision. To those who not only are of the circumcision but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father, Abraham, which he had while uncircumcised.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father, we ask that this day You would reveal to us wondrous truth from Your word and that You would open our hearts, not only to understand but to embrace it. For those here this day who believe on Jesus Christ and yet who struggle sometimes with their assurance of the fullness of His love. We pray that by Your word that they would be strengthened and comforted and made strong in the grace which is in Jesus Christ. If others come not trusting in Jesus Christ, perhaps not openly rejecting Him, perhaps not rejecting fellowship with His people, or even membership in some local church, and yet who have *never really dealt with Christ, they've never trusted in Him. They are clinging to something else, something external, something different. We pray that they, too, would see precisely what Paul is saying here. The ground of all of our hope is Jesus, and if we are not united to Him by faith, there is no hope. And if we have Him, there is nothing else that we need. Help all of us to see the glory of that truth and to praise You. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Paul wants every believer to understand something about this glorious truth of justification. We may not end up being professors of theology somewhere, but He wants us to be understanders of the doctrine of justification. It's so important, isn't it? Some rudimentary understanding of justification is really necessary for you to have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. If you really think that you save yourself is it possible to receive the free grace that is offered in Jesus Christ? Paul knows you need to know something about what it means to be saved by grace through faith. Justified. Declared righteous by God, by His grace, receiving that righteousness of Christ by faith in order to participate in that salvation which He has planned for all His people.

But it's not only important for salvation, it's important for our assurance. There are many believers for various reasons: some of them personality reasons, some of them theological reasons who struggle with assurance. They have a hard time perhaps feeling the certainty and the enduring character of God's love for them. They have a hard time coming to grips with the fact that God will never let them go. That there's nothing in them that He can later discover which will so displease Him that He will let go of His grip of grace. And they need to be reminded that Christ is the ground of their hope. There's nothing in them that made them lovable to God. That His love for them was something that came out of His own heart. It's constant, it's pure, He knew everything about us from the beginning, and yet He loved us still. There's nothing that He will ever discover about us that He didn't already know. And as we trust in Jesus Christ, there's nothing that can ever distance us from His love. We need to know that assuring truth of His justification by grace through faith. It's absolutely essential if we're going to be truly and rightly assured.

But it's also absolutely essential for discipleship. How can we encourage the brothers and sisters in love and good deeds if we don't know how God saves us, if we don't know how God declares us righteous. How can we encourage a brother or a sister who's struggling with assurance. How can we help someone know how to come into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ? You see, understanding justification is important for discipleship, too.

So Paul expects each of us to be theologians in a sense. There are some things that we need to understand the essentials of very clearly. And to understand justification also requires that we understand some other things, too. Among them how the New Testament relates to the Old Testament, especially in this whole area of circumcision and the ceremonial law. Because you'll remember that in the Old Testament to refuse circumcision was to refuse God. To refuse circumcision was to repudiate the covenant community and the promises that God had made. In Genesis 17 it was clearly said, "He who refuses the sign of circumcision is cut off from My people." And here suddenly Paul is saying circumcision doesn't matter. Here Paul is saying, in fact, for those Gentile converts of the faith, they ought not be circumcised. And those who would force them to be circumcised are, in fact, themselves repudiating the covenant. And if you're a Jewish Christians, or if you're a Jewish hearer of those words as Paul is first saying them, perhaps you're scratching your head. And you're saying, "Hold on, let me get something straight. In the Old Testament, if I refuse the sign of circumcision, I'm refusing God His promises in the covenant community. In the New Testament, if I demand that Gentiles be circumcised, I'm refusing God His promises and the covenant community. What happened, Paul?" Well, Paul is anxious to explain that to us.

Now perhaps you have not been asking that question today. Perhaps you did not come here saying how could it be that someone who is not circumcised could receive the grace of Christ. I suspect that most of you were not thinking about

that this week. And you may be saying well, how then is what Paul is talking about in this passage, how does it speak to me? It does. I promise you it does. I'll show you that it does. Be turning to Acts, chapter 15, verse 1, and as you turn there, let me say that this issue of whether the uncircumcised can participate in the justifying work of Christ, if we can receive the benefits which flow from the justifying work of Christ, is a very practical issue. Even if we're not Jewish converts to Christianity, it's a very practical question.

The whole issue of how your faith in Christ relates to outward rites and rituals is brought up by this issue that Paul is raising before us. For instance, many of you perhaps grew up in churches that taught that baptism was necessary for salvation. There are many churches that teach that a person must believe in Christ, repent and be baptized with water in order to be saved. Paul's words speak to that assertion, and in fact, meet that assertion with a negation as we will understand it here. Perhaps you thought that the way that person receives grace depends upon their participation in some sort of outward rite, whether it be some mystical experience in the Lord's Supper as administered by a particular church, or the receiving of some special kind of last rites by a priest. And Paul's words here speak to the relationship that saving faith has to outward religious rights. So let's concentrate on what Paul is telling us today.

I. Must one be a Jew in order to be justified?

Paul is explaining to us again the freeness of justification. He is, in verse 9, putting before us a question. Does one have to be a Jew in order to be justified? And again, you may not have been thinking that question. Most of us are Gentiles. There are relatively few Jewish converts to Christianity in our congregation. So we may not have been wondering if one can be a Christian without converting and to Judaism and receiving circumcision. But that was a very practical question for Paul. There were many people who taught and were teaching Christians that they could not receive the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ without being circumcised, without obeying the mosaic ceremonial law without becoming as it were "good practicing" Jews. Now that's not a surmise on my part. I just asked you to turn to Acts, chapter 15, verse 1. The whole controversy that began there in Jerusalem and which was eventually settled through the apostles and the elders as they met began this way. Listen to verse 1 of Acts 15. "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Paul practically had to face that question in his ministry. People said, "Look, justification by grace is true, but it's only true for those who have been circumcised, those who have become good Jews. They accept the ceremonial code. For all those people justification is a reality and a possibility. But not for those who are not circumcised.

And Paul wants to pose that question: Does one have to be a Jew in order to be

justified? In order that we will understand his very clear and mistakable answer, the main thing that he wants to get across in these four short verses is simply this: Justification is for everyone. Justification by grace through faith is for everyone, Jew and Gentile. It's by faith, it's apart from circumcision. It's for everyone. It's not for the Jews only. Throughout his ministry, he faced those who claimed that Gentile converts to Christianity had to be circumcised and to keep the mosaic ceremonial code in order to be Christians in good standing and to be part of the church. He calls them Judaizers. And those are the circumstance that the church was dealing with in Acts, chapter 15, verse 1. And Paul here explains. He gives one reason why they are so wrong. And he does it by asking a question. He says imputed righteousness is the blessing of being counted a man who has been credited with the righteousness of Christ, and who has not been counted as sinful because of his own sins. Is that for the circumcised only, or is for the uncircumcised as well? Is that blessing, is that promise, is it only for Jews or is it for Gentiles as well? And he hints at the answer in verse 9 by quoting Genesis 15, verse 6 again. You remember he's already pointed us to that passage once. And he does so again. Faith, he says, was credited to Abraham as righteous.

Now Paul quotes that passage again for you because he's giving you a hint at the right answer to his question. Is the blessedness of being justified by grace through faith, for Jews only, or is it also for Gentiles? He says, well, let me quote it to you one more time. Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness. He is asking you to think about the state Abraham was in with regard to circumcision, at the time when God made that pronouncement about him. He's saying, "Think about Abraham. Was he a circumcised man or was he an uncircumcised man when God said 'Abraham, I accept you as righteous because of the faith which you have in me and in my promise.'" Paul's point for doing that is to emphasize that justification is available to everyone by faith. And that nothing that we do, whether it be ceremonial or whether it be moral, contributes to that justification, because the ground of that justification is not something in us, and it's not something that we do, it's grounded in what Christ does. And therefore, circumcision, and outward rituals contribute nothing to that justification.

And you see that's a word that we need to hear just as much as they need to hear, because there are all sorts of people that are ready to say as Christians, "Oh, Christ saves, but it's Christ, plus water baptism." Or, "Christ, plus water baptism is the way we do it." Or, "Christ, plus some extraordinary experience of the Holy Spirit wherein you do miraculous deeds and speak in tongues and prophesy. That's what you need in order to be saved." Or, "It's Christ, plus some mystic experience when you come to the Lord's table." They're always ready to add one more thing, and Paul is saying, "No, no, no, you don't understand. It's Christ, and it's faith in Him. No plus here. No plus here." That's the main thing that Paul is wanting to emphasize in this passage, and he does it by working it out for us.

II. Abraham was declared righteous before circumcision.

Look at verse 10. He tells us the second thing there. Having asked us this question, does one have to be a Jew in order to be justified? He begins to answer it explicitly. He's hinted at an answer in verse 9. Now in verse 10, he's going to begin to explicitly answer the question. When Abraham was declared righteous, Paul wants you to ask what sort of state was he in? When was it that Abraham was justified? When was it that he was declared righteous? Was it before his circumcision or was it after his circumcision, Paul asked. How then was it credited, when he was circumcised or when he was uncircumcised? In other words, Paul is saying the very timing of Abraham's justification is important, and it teaches you a truth. Paul wants you to remember that Abraham was imputed righteousness, he was counted as righteous, at least fourteen years before he was circumcised. In fact, by the Jewish reckoning, it was twenty-nine years before he was circumcised.

And Paul says, "Now think about that for a minute. If justification, as my Jewish opponents say, is only for the Jews, how could it be that the uncircumcised Abraham could have been justified twenty-nine years before he was circumcised." He says, "The very timing of Abraham's experience of justification proves that justification is both for the circumcised and for the uncircumcised." It's important for us to remember that circumcision wasn't just an ethnic mark, it wasn't just for people who were blood Jews, we might say. It wasn't just a national mark, it wasn't just a non-religious or sort of a secular national sign that you are part of Israel. It was a spiritual sign.

Circumcision was the mark of belonging to the covenant community. It was not merely ethnic or national non-Jews, those who are not Jews by blood, who could become Jews by faith in the receiving of this sign of circumcision. This is clear from Genesis to the end of the Old Testament. In Genesis, chapter 17, verses 12 and 13, when circumcision was first commanded, isn't it interesting that God explicitly tells Abram that he is to give that sign even to the strangers, the foreigners, who dwell in his household, who have been bought with money from foreigners. It's not just people who are of the clean, pure blood line of Abraham that are to be given this sign. Everyone in his tent, foreigner or not, slave or free, is to be given this sign. But at the end of the Old Testament time frame, the same is true. If you were to turn to Esther, chapter 8, verse 17, you'd find a very interesting verse there. You may remember that Haman had a plot against the Jews. He wanted to wipe them out. He talked the king into making a decree that basically said that it was open season on Jews. People could attack them and take everything from them with impunity. Now in that particular area of Media-Persia, once the king made his declaration, he couldn't take it back. And so when Mordecai and Esther, through their own bravery and courage, made this plot known to the king, he couldn't withdraw that dictate, he had to come up with something else. So here's what he did. He said, "Okay, on that same day, on that

same time that I had originally decreed that there was a free for all on the Jews, here's the new deal. The Jews can defend themselves. I'm going to help them to defend themselves; I'm going to help them defend themselves, and further anybody that attacks them, the Jews have the right, with impunity, to take everything that they own, everything that they have, and there will be legal recourse. In other words, if they take it from you, you never get it back. Your family, your lands, your inheritance, everything. We're told in Esther, chapter 8, verse 17, because of this decree and because of the work of the Lord, the fear of the Jews was on everyone. And, we're told, that many became Jews. This is a strange thing. These are Gentiles. How could they have become Jews? Was it through intermarriage and through having sort of half-Jewish children? It was through receiving the sign of circumcision. They became part of the covenant community. They believed in the one true God of Israel. But Paul is saying here, in Romans, chapter 4, verses 9 through 12 that no religious rite makes you just before God. No religious rite, even circumcision makes you justifiable before God. No religious rite, even circumcision, is necessary in order to be justified before God, because God's justification is without reference to our deeds. It's not based upon anything that we've done, even something that God's commands us to do, like circumcision. Paul is emphasizing that the timing of Abraham's justification teaches us that circumcision is not necessary for justification.

It's a very important lesson for us to learn, because we still live in a day and time where people teach that there are certain religious rights that need to be done in order to be right with God. And it's very important for us to know the difference between something which is necessary for salvation and something which is necessary for obedience. And it's very important for us to know the distinction between something that is required in order to be accepted by God, and something that flows from and confirms that we have been accepted with God. Knowing that difference is very, very important, and Paul is pointing to it here. For instance, it is clear from what Paul is saying that to say that baptism, that water baptism is somehow necessary for salvation is wrong. You know Baptists and Presbyterians, for instance, have some differences over baptism. Who ought to receive it? How it ought to be done. Who are the proper recipients? What's the right mode? But we're absolutely agreed on this: water baptism is not necessary for salvation, and yet there are many who teach that it is; that if you do not receive water baptism, you are not and cannot be saved. So that in some cases, there are priests and people who will actually go to a dying infant's hospital room and attempt to baptize the child before the child dies because baptism is necessary for salvation. And the apostle Paul is saying there is no rite which is necessary for justification, because justification is not based on what we do, it's based on what Christ has done. And the righteousness that we received in justification is not our righteousness, it's not our moral righteousness, it's not our ritual righteousness, it's Christ's righteousness. "And furthermore," Paul says, "the ceremonial code pointed to a greater righteousness to come and that righteousness is the righteousness of Christ."

III. Even the nature of circumcision testifies to justification by grace.

And so he goes on verse 11 to make it clear that the nature of circumcision itself testifies to justification by grace. "Abraham's circumcision," we're told by Paul in verse 11, "was a sign and a seal of the imputed righteousness which he received by faith." Paul is actually claiming that the nature of circumcision itself testifies to justification by grace through faith. Paul tells us three things about justification in that short verse: He tells us that it's a sign, he tells us that it's a seal, and he tells us that it sets forth imputed righteousness. Let's look at each of those.

Circumcision is a sign. It's symbolic. In other words God has ordained it as a spiritual symbol. What's it a symbol of? It's an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality. It points to something. Now that in and of itself is an argument against circumcision actually saving. Does a sign actually get you to the place that you are going? No. It points there. When you get to the sign on Interstate 20 that says you're forty-two miles from Jackson and seven from Chunky, are you in Jackson? No. The sign points you there, but the sign does not bring about the reality. It points you there. It's a sign. It's a sign of the imputed righteousness by faith.

Secondly, it's a seal. It's a confirmation. There again you see an argument against the sign bringing about the reality. What is a mark? What's a seal? What's a stamp? What's a confirmation? It's there to reiterate the reality which has been pledged. Does it bring about the reality? No, it confirms the reality. It's there to assure us. The sign of circumcision doesn't bring about the reality of God's love for Abraham, it confirms it. God is saying, "Look, Abraham, I love you, I love you so much. Listen to Me. I'm going to put a mark in your flesh so that you can't even look at yourself without seeing that I love you." Did it cause God's love? No. Was it the condition of God's love? No. Did it motivate God's love? No. It reminded Abraham that God already loved him.

Then Paul says astonishingly it was to sign and to seal, it was to point to and confirm what? The righteousness of faith which he had while uncircumcised. In other words, it was to confirm to Abraham that God had credited him as a righteous man not based on his deeds. And boy, was that ever important for Abraham, because he was going to fail in faith in the very next chapter after this was declared, chapter 16. He was going to fail, he was utterly going to flop. And that important for you to hear. God's justifying word is not based on something in you. It's based on something that Christ has done for you. The nature of circumcision itself testifies to the reality that God saves us by grace.

IV. Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe.

And then finally, in the end of verse 11, in verse 12, Paul tells us this. The

circumstances of Abraham's justification enabled him to serve as the spiritual father to both believing Jews and to Gentiles. "Abraham, in other words," Paul says, is the spiritual father of all who believe in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, whether circumcised or not." "Abraham himself was declared righteous," Paul says, "while he was a Gentile." He was uncircumcised. And so he is able to be the spiritual father perfectly well. Think of how this would have rung in the years of the Gentile Christians there who were perhaps thinking that they were sort of second class citizens. "Abraham was just like you," Paul is saying, "He was just like you when God declared him to be righteous. He didn't have the mark of circumcision, he wasn't even a Jew." And then he can turn to the Jewish people in the congregation, and he can say, "And Abraham is your spiritual father, too, because you followed his footsteps in faith." He believed in God and in His promises. You've believed in God and in His promises. He believed in the coming Messiah. You've believed in the Messiah that comes. He's your father, too.

But you see the key there in either case is faith. Believing in Christ. Receiving Him as He is offered in the gospel, whether Jew or Gentile. That's the thing. It's not anything else. It's not any outward righteousness. It's not any deed, it's not any ceremonial righteousness. It's not even moral righteousness on your own part. It's Christ's righteousness received by faith. Now that's an important lesson for all of us here to understand. If we're not believers, or if we're people who profess to be believers, and yet our trust is in something other than in Jesus Christ or in addition to Jesus Christ, we need to learn a lesson. Salvation is in Christ alone, and adding anything to Him is taking away from Him. If we're believers we need to be reminded again and again, though certainly we take measure of our own growth and grace. Though certainly we take measure to see that God is growing us up in wisdom and knowledge in accordance with his word, ultimately the ground of our assurance is not in that which God is doing in us in sanctification. The ground of our assurance is found in what God has done for us in Christ Jesus, and everything else flows from that. These words of Paul are far from impractical. Every single one of us needs to come to grips with these things this day. May God make it so. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, we are debtors to your mercy alone, your covenant mercy. Help us truly, oh God, to understand what this means. If there is anyone here this day who does not know what it is to trust in Christ alone, I pray that by Your Spirit you would open their eyes to see it, even through the help of friends who already know Christ, I pray that these dear friends would be led to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. If we are believers struggling with assurance, I pray that You would bolster our faith and our assurance through Jesus Christ in an understanding of Your free justification. And all these things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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