

“WHEN DID GOD COUNT FAITH AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

September 24, 2023, 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: Romans 4:9-12

Is this blessing only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised? Vs. 4.9.

Is this blessing? What blessing? Remember the blessings from last week.

Remember the blessings of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works. Their lawless deeds are forgiven. Their sins are covered. Their sins are not counted against them. All four of these are now combined into one singular blessing.

So to whom is this blessing given? To the circumcised or the uncircumcised? To those who have the mark of the covenant of God as God's people or those who don't? To the Jews or to the Gentiles?

You know how the Jews answered this question, the blessings are for the children of Abraham. Why?

In Genesis 12 God told Abraham to leave his own country and go to the land He was calling him to, and Abraham rose up and went, he obeyed God, believing in the promise. In Genesis 15 God promised Abraham his descendants would be like the stars in the sky and Abraham believed God and God credited his faith to him as righteousness. Then in Genesis 17 God confirmed His promise by establishing a covenant with Abraham, the sign and seal of which was circumcision.

This was the beginning of the people of God, the racial, ethnic group called Jews. The Jews were the special, set apart people who had Abraham as their father. For the Jews identity was everything, who their father was separated them from everyone else.

Not unlike Protestants might claim Luther as their father, and reformed Protestants might claim Calvin as their father, and Americans might claim George Washington as the father of their country.

Is identity important to us? Of course it is. Where do you think the saying, “If you ain't Dutch, you ain't much” comes from? It comes from ethnic pride in our Dutch heritage and identity. We all have family identity, ethnic identity, national identity, religious identity and they are all inseparable.

I had dinner Friday night with my brother and sister. We are family, proud of our family, our children and growing number of grandchildren. I have racial identity, I am white. Nowadays

that is not something to go around boasting in, it comes off as racially biased or insensitive. I am American, is it still OK to be proud to be an American? Most of us are in some way. I am Christian, I am willing to boast in Christ. I am a Reformed Christian, or better yet a Christian Reformed Christian from Lynden, WA. Family identity, ethnic identity, national identity, religious identity.

We all have our different tribes we are a part of and they are inseparably mixed and important to us. I say this to make the point that the Jews were all about their identity.

What did it mean to be a son of Abraham, it meant they were a Jew. What did it mean to be a Jew, it meant they worshipped Yahweh, the one true God. What did it mean to worship the one true God, it meant they belonged to the covenant people of God, to Israel. And what did it mean to be the covenant people of God, it meant they alone had the mark of the covenant which separated them from all the other peoples and nations.

This identity was everything to them and they hung tightly to their family identity as the sons of Abraham, to their ethnic identity as Jews, their religious identity as worshippers of Yahweh. They were proud of it, they boasted in it.

Circumcision was the first sign of obedience to the law, the first sign that defined them as the people of Yahweh. To them to be uncircumcised was repulsive, disgusting.

If you want to know what the central conflict was in the early church just read Paul's letter to the Galatians. The Jewish converts to Christianity were bringing their identity into the church and insisting non-Jewish converts had to become like them, had to have the mark of the covenant. It would be like saying you had to be Dutch or born in Holland to be a member of the CRC.

This is why Paul is so fixated on pounding the truth that God's righteousness was credited to people by faith alone apart from works. Here is our short text Paul uses the c word ten times. This is where the battle line was drawn. Hence Paul's questions, three of them.

Who is the blessing for? To answer this Paul returns to his first witness, he calls Abraham back on the stand and he doubles down, he goes all in. He uses the hero of their faith, their daddy.

Paul repeats himself by quoting again from the Jew's Bible, from Genesis. Faith was counted or credited to Abraham as righteousness.

But then Paul asks another question that puts the Jews in a terrible dilemma.

How was it credited? When was it credited? Vs. 10.

Was Abraham circumcised before or after his faith was credited as righteousness? It's an easy question, the answer is right there in their Bible. They all knew he received the mark after faith, 24 years after God credited him with righteousness.

It is right there, so clear, so simple, how could anyone have missed it for the past two thousand years. It's embarrassing.

Paul pulled down the entire house of cards, Paul destroyed their hypocritical religious pride. He obliterated their trust in the works of the law. Paul took away from them everything they trusted in except one thing.

Which came first, the faith or the sign and seal of the faith? Abraham possessed righteousness before any works of the law. Circumcision was not the cause of Abraham's righteousness or justification or acceptance with God. And if that is true, then circumcision is not necessary to be justified with God.

This truth was founded not on Paul, but on the great father of their faith, on no less of an authority than father Abraham himself. Paul had to rub the Jews noses in this reality, that the privileges of the people of God were not inseparably connected to the sign of the covenant, to the works of the law, but to faith.

But this leads to another important question implied in vs. 11.

If Abraham was already justified and counted as righteous, then what is the point or purpose of circumcision? Vs. 11.

For the Jews they had long ago lost their bearings on what mattered most. They had come to trust in the law, works, in outward actions and appearances, in rituals and traditions. The Jews had thrown out faith and belief in God and had hung onto the sign, the ceremony. But the sign and the ceremony had no meaning without the faith, the belief.

It's like a man who has a wedding ring, but cheats on his wife. He has the sign but not the faithfulness, so the symbol is meaningless.

Paul doesn't completely throw out the sign of the covenant. He just reestablishes its true and right purpose as a sign and seal.

When you do acts of obedience, when you seek to obey God's Word and live according to the truth of it, that doesn't give you right standing with God, it is a sign, a symbol of your right standing with God. You have faith in Jesus, and out of that faith you act. It is not the cause of your faith, it is your response to your faith.

Can we point fingers at the Jews when we do the same thing? It is the constant bent of our hearts to trust more in symbols than the reality. We want to seek salvation by our own means. We want to do something, contribute something.

The sinfulness of the human heart never ceases. All men everywhere seek to be saved by something they do. People all over the world are desperate to do something to secure their favor with God, willing to do almost anything.

Some take a pilgrimage to Mecca, some pray at the Wailing Wall, some bathe in the sacred Ganges, some spin their Tibetan prayer wheels, some get sprinkled with holy water in St. Peter's in the Vatican, or light candles to Mary. Some mow their lawn, wash their cars and don't work on Sunday. Without faith they are empty, lifeless, devoid of truth, without hope or real help.

All of this avoids dealing with our hearts before God. We don't want to think about our hearts before a holy God. We will try anything except give our hearts to Jesus. All of this misses the complete simplicity of faith. No rituals, no superstitions, no bells and smells.

Baptismal regeneration is still a thing in the church today, the belief that we must be baptized to be saved. Do the waters of baptism wash away our sins, or is it our faith in the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from our sins? Without faith the sacraments are meaningless, they are hypocrisy. And that is true for Baptists and for Presbyterians and Reformed.

Listen to Ephesians 4:5 [There is] one Lord, one faith, one baptism. That's the order, don't turn it around.

Circumcision is the sign of faith, the seal of righteousness. It confirms the righteousness of faith already received while uncircumcised. It is the effect, not the cause.

It marks Abraham as the father of the seed who would crush Satan, as the father of the line from which Christ would come. This is the sign of the thing that is to come, the assurance or promise of a coming revelation of the righteousness of God.

The sign was to be given on the eighth day after birth. When did Jesus rise from the dead? On the eighth day, the day after the sabbath, on the first day of the week. On that day our Lord Jesus Christ brought to light everlasting righteousness.

What did Paul say back in Romans 1:17 about the Gospel? In the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith. What was signed and sealed is delivered on the eighth day by Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfilled all righteousness and became our righteousness on the cross.

Who is Abraham father of? Who can claim Abraham as their father? Vss. 11b-12.

In God's great universal plan of salvation, Abraham is the father of the uncircumcised believers and of the circumcised believers. "By faith alone" was a Gentile principle before it was a Jewish principle.

Paul turns the religious world upside down. It is not the Gentiles who must receive the Jew's circumcision to be saved, it is the Jews who must receive the Gentile's faith to be saved, the faith Abraham had long before he had the mark of the Jew.

Abraham is the father of the Jews, but only a certain kind of Jew. Not the Jew who has only been circumcised in the flesh, but the Jew who has been circumcised in the heart, those who walk in the kind of faith that Abraham had while he was still uncircumcised.

Notice what this implies. Abraham is a father to some of his own descendants and not a father to some others of his own descendants. He is not equally father to them all. Only to those who walk in his faith, who had his faith, only to them is he a true spiritual father.

Not all who are Israel are Israel, not all who are descended from Abraham are true sons of Abraham.

Galatians 3:29 If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Do you see the glorious good news for us Gentiles in what God has done? By justifying Abraham by faith and crediting that to him as righteousness before he was circumcised, God showed that His plan of salvation was for all people. God had us in mind thousands of years ago. Abraham is our spiritual father.

Through the door of faith, every single person on earth can come in, no matter their family, race, ethnicity, color, culture, rituals or traditions, education, personality. The Gospel is for everyone. God said in Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed and all the families of earth would be blessed and so we are.

Implications and application.

This impacts how we prepare to come to the Lord's Table next Sunday. This passage speaks directly to the purpose and nature, the blessing and benefit of the sacraments. What is the purpose of the sacraments if they don't secure our salvation? They are means of grace, signs of grace, they point away from themselves to something else.

We need sacraments to reassure us and remind us of our faith and the righteousness given to us. But the sacraments are no replacement for heart religion, for faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

By themselves, just as actions, they are of no profit or benefit. An unbeliever who participates in them derives no benefit, and actually by their hypocrisy brings the threat of judgment on themselves.

Why do I call it hypocrisy? Hypocrisy is when we show ourselves to be one thing by our actions but another thing in our hearts.

Christianity is a heart religion, it is a matter of the heart, of repentance and faith. The sacred symbols of our faith seen in baptism and the Lord's Supper are meant to be signs and seals of God's grace in our hearts.

Deuteronomy 30:6 The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

From the beginning the physical sign of the covenant was not the most important thing, it was meant to be a symbol of cutting away the corruption of sin, a circumcising of the heart.

We are not saved by outward signs. We are not saved by baptism, we are not saved by the Lord's Supper, we are not saved by our profession of faith or by church membership or doing all the right things. We are not saved by any of our works or actions, however good they might be or however much better they are of someone else's actions.

If we disconnect faith from the signs of our faith then they become lifeless, useless.

Salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ and all the blessings of God flow to those who by grace through faith trust in Jesus alone. This is the simplicity of faith. If we believe in our hearts and confess with our mouth, we will be saved.

The most beautiful thing to God is a broken and contrite heart, this He will never despise. He accepts us not based on our righteousness, but on the basis of Christ's righteousness. Believe and be saved. Grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. Amen.