



# 2022 Weekly Devotions

Week of: Aug 29<sup>th</sup> - Sept 4<sup>th</sup>

Sermon: August 28<sup>th</sup>



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH  
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**August 29**

**Matthew 5:17-20**

Acts 15 confronts us with a few issues that might be confusing to the student of the Bible. One of the most difficult aspects of the text to understand lies in the biblical nature of the argument of the Pharisees. After all, isn't it true that God's law dictated circumcision for those who wanted to enter the people of God? If so, how does the church justify neglecting this clear command in the Bible?

The answer to the question is very important! In fact, it is one of the most attacked concepts in all biblical teaching. Many people accuse Christians of being hypocrites by virtue of the fact that it seems as if we select which passages still apply and which ones don't. In this case, how could God say that those who would be apart of His people needed to be circumcised and then reverse course years later?

Some may claim that this is an example of God being wishy-washy or it is proof that Jesus' disciples were not faithful to the Bible! This opinion is rooted in the idea that all portions of the Scripture are relevant to the Christian today and that is the root of the problem. You see, we believe that the law is good, and it was given to us by God. Furthermore, we believe that all Scripture is inspired by God and, therefore, useful to us. How then do we justify the negation of this passage? The answer is found in our passage for the day.

The teaching of the Christian church is that Jesus came and fulfilled the law, of which circumcision was apart, on behalf of those who He would call to Himself. Having fulfilled the terms of this Covenant of works, Jesus offers those who would believe on Him a New Covenant which was established by Him at His death. Christ did not abolish the law (including the necessity of circumcision), He fulfilled it. Now, having fulfilled the law, He can offer us His righteousness allowing us to relate to our Father in total perfection through His righteous lifestyle.

The implications of this are massive and they include circumcision. No longer do we need to be circumcised in order to be apart of God's people, Jesus has fulfilled that portion of Scripture and has given us a new, better mark of belonging to God, the Holy Spirit. In the Spirit our hearts are circumcised, and our lives are transformed thereby constituting a greater proof of our belonging to God's chosen people.

Now, some folks may wonder how we know what applies to us as New Covenant believers and what does not. We have actually covered that topic in some length during a recent sermon, but the short answer is that we relate to God now through the New Covenant and the New Covenant is outlined and articulated to us in the New Testament. These books constitute the resource we have to explain our responsibility before the Lord. There are many portions of overlap between the Old and New Testament (commands to avoid idolatry, prohibitions of steaking and adultery, etc.) but there are also aspects of the Old Covenant that do not show up in New Covenant directives including the command to circumcision. This is why we can say, with full conviction, that it is unnecessary for a New Covenant believer to be circumcised in order to enter into the Kingdom of God. The gate to entry is Christ alone, anyone who would attempt to add a second requirement or door of entry is sorely mistaken and must be corrected.

**August 30**

**Colossians 2:11-12**

Yesterday we saw that Christ has fulfilled the terms and obligations of the Old Covenant. As He did so, Jesus satisfied the demand of God for righteousness and, in His death and resurrection, Christ atoned for our sin. Does this totally eradicate the importance of the law (aka the “rules of the Old Covenant)? Hardly! The law is good, it demonstrates God’s character, and, in many cases, it provides a picture or foreshadowing of God’s greater plan of redemption. This does not mean that all of the law applies to us in the same way that it did the Jews in the Old Testament, but it does mean that all of it is useful to us in pointing us to God’s greater plan and/or God’s character and desires for His covenant people.

I want to talk to you a moment about how circumcision, in the old covenant, is one of those means of foreshadowing. You see, if we are not careful, we may be tempted to draw a wrong conclusion about the role of circumcision in the lives of New Testament believers. The New Testament does not negate the importance of circumcision, it simply declares that God has a greater “version” if you will of circumcision to offer those who are believers in Christ.

Our passage for today is probably the best example of this kind of New Covenant theology as Paul tells his readers that they were “circumcised”. A few issues may seem to appear with this teaching. First, he is speaking to all believers which would include females. We don’t have to be biology majors to realize that this is an issue if Paul is referring to the physical act of circumcision! Second, we realize based on what has taken place previously in the book of Acts that circumcision was no longer necessary according to the decision of the early church as its leadership was informed by the Spirit. How then can Paul make such a claim?

R.C. Sproul helps us immensely here as he comments on the connection and distinction between circumcision in the Old Testament and its New Testament (and better) counterpart. Sproul states: “As the initiating rite of the old covenant, circumcision signified cutting away sin, undergoing a change of heart and being included in the household of faith. Dramatically, Paul says that in their baptism into Christ and into His body, these Gentiles have already been circumcised. Baptism is the circumcision of Christ, and it signifies the washing away of sin, personal renewal by the Spirit of God and membership in the body.”

Just as circumcised believers in the Old Covenant entered the Kingdom by virtue of their outward act of obedience, now New Covenant believers enter the covenant of grace and join with God’s people through baptism which is the greater manifestation of circumcision.

One more point must be made here... we are not primarily speaking of water baptism. Water baptism is the outward sign or declaration of what God has done inwardly. The point of baptism by immersion is to testify to the reality that God has saved us by faith and to demonstrate our solidarity with a local congregation. Nevertheless, the New Testament speaks of baptism by the Spirit as the event or occurrence which takes place at our salvation. When God grants us faith, we are indwelt by the Spirit, cleansed of our sin and our hearts are changed which joins us to Christ and to all those who have been saved by grace through faith. In this way, New Covenant salvation, the baptism of the Spirit, is the greater and fuller circumcision.

**August 31**

**Matthew 7:13-14**

Today's passage is a familiar one to many of you as it records some of Jesus' Words as He preached His most famous sermon that we call the "sermon on the mount". In this portion of Scripture, Jesus implores His audience to "enter through the narrow gate". This is a text that is dealing with the subject of salvation. Jesus illuminates for us that there are "two gates". One gate is wide, and it leads to destruction and the other is narrow, but it leads to eternal life.

As we read this text, it is important to note the way it applies or helps us understand the real issue that is being faced by the church in Jerusalem over the issue of circumcision. There was the immediate subject, i.e., whether a Gentile should have to be circumcised to be apart of the church, and there was the much larger question, how is a person united to Christ and to the church thereby enjoying eternal life?

The contrast in our text today is illustrative of the problem. When Jesus says the gate is wide, He means that most folks are going to enter through it, leading to eternal destruction. The way in which they enter is the same, they trust in something or someone else for their salvation. It doesn't really matter if a person entrusts their eternity with Allah, science, or their own skill! Each of those decisions leads to the same destination. Conversely, only those who enter through Christ alone will journey onwards toward eternal life with Him.

This eternal reality is what was at stake in Acts 15. If the believers from the party of the Pharisees were successful in pushing for something to be added to the Gospel (in this case the requirement of the action of circumcision) then the narrow gate would be closed. We do not enter the Kingdom by our works, we enter through Christ whose works are applied to us by grace through faith in Him.

As Jesus is teaching, He is illuminating to us the truth that this decision won't be in accordance with popular sentiment. The reason why the gate to eternal destruction is so wide is at least in part due to the fact that all mankind naturally turns towards other means. We struggle to remember and apply and stand on the Gospel alone, but we must! The way, the truth and the life is Christ and Christ alone. Therefore anyone, or anything, that would seek to add to the way or make more rules for how one joins us on the path to eternal bliss must be resisted. This is what the early church recognized, and it must be our plan and purpose to see and hold to the gate of Christ alone in our day.

**September 1**

**Psalm 22:27-28**

We have dealt with the theological argument of the party of the Pharisees to this point. The truth is that these men who stood in opposition to the working of the Spirit through Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and others did have Scripture that seemed to support their claim. They appeared to be standing on truth and, therefore, they represented an attitude and posture that projected a desire to see God honored. This may have been the veneer, but it seems rather obvious that there were other intentions as they made their case. Sometimes lost men can leverage the Bible to achieve their sinful motivations and ends. It seems as if this was the plan in Acts 15.

You see, the real argument was more than likely not about the necessity of circumcision, the real issue was more than likely a desire to keep the church free from the “outsiders”. These men were Jews who were used to a rather homogenous group of worshippers and now they were confronted with people from different cultures, backgrounds and even languages! Everything was changing so fast, and things weren’t nearly as comfortable as they had been for many. If I am right about this, then the issue was not so much circumcision as it was a means of keeping the church free from people who didn’t belong.

Over and against this idea of Jewish isolation, the Old Testament repeatedly claims that God’s plan of redemption is for the nations’ redemption. This was James’ point in the last portion of our passage on Sunday and it should be our conviction as well that God has always purposed to redeem a people comprised of individuals from every tribe, tongue, and nation. This means that God’s people will be diverse in many ways even as they are united in Christ alone.

Today’s text is one example of God’s stated desire to redeem the nations. Notice a few things about our verses for the day. First, I want you to see the inclusive language. David says, “all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord.” The universal “all” in the beginning of the passage is a reminder that God’s plan encompasses the totality of the people groups that inhabit our planet. Indeed, this is an unguarded statement. God does not give us any exception, there are none who are unqualified by virtue of their nationality, previous religious affiliation, or culture. Instead, the Lord spoke through David reminding us that there was coming a day when the world would come to Christ.

Second, notice the authority of the one who gives this declaration. Verse 28 says “for the kingship belongs to the Lord.” To be clear, there are more reasons for this phrase but, for our purposes, I want to remind you that the One stating that all nations would be redeemed is the One with all authority to do as He pleases. Who are we to tell God that He cannot redeem the Gentiles, or in our case, any subset of the Gentile population? This was a pertinent question in Acts 15 as Peter, Paul, Barnabas and the like respond to the assertion that Gentiles must be circumcised by simply pointing out that God was saving them without circumcision! If God chooses to redeem a man, who are we to say that He can’t? He is King and, therefore, He has the authority to do whatever He pleases.

**September 2**

**Isaiah 49:6**

We know that what Jesus accomplished on the cross is the ground of all man's salvation. He is the means whereby anyone is saved, and His mission was to redeem those that God ordained for salvation before the foundation of the earth. Today's passage reminds us that God's plan for the salvation of His children was fixated on the nations.

Our passage is found in a chapter that records one of the "servant songs" of Isaiah. These are rich, meaningful, and prophetic chapters that look forward to the day that God's Servant (the Messiah, Jesus Christ) would come to purchase salvation for His children through His suffering. In light of their purpose, the servant songs are some of the most illustrative, helpful, and thorough prophecies about the coming Person of Christ. They detail His character, His mission, and the joy of those who will be redeemed through Him.

Today, I want us to see that Isaiah predicted (through the inspiration of the Spirit) that this suffering servant would "make you as a light for the nations". The term light is often used as a picture of salvation. Jesus is the "light of the world" in that He illuminates God's character and His redemptive act so that men can see the glory of God and the truth about their existence in both its purpose and nature. Here, Isaiah is informing us that God's purpose in bringing this illumination exceeds ethnic Jews. While it most certainly doesn't exclude them, and Jesus was focused primarily on them at first, we must recognize that Christ died to redeem people from across the world. This makes the objection to Gentiles entering the fellowship unbiblical and uninformed. The whole point of God's redemptive strategy was to create a diverse and ethnically rich people who would be united by faith in Christ to each other and, most importantly, to God in Christ.

Second, I want you to see that the goal of this is consistent with Jesus' commission to His disciples in Acts. In Acts 1:8, Christ tells His disciples to be His witnesses to "the ends of the earth". This may have struck them as bizarre considering the Jewish centric world in which they had lived, but it simply echoes what the prophet Isaiah was inspired to write some centuries before. The goal of the suffering servant was to extend God's salvation to "the end of the earth." When Jesus affirms that this should be the mission of His apostles, He is telling them that He is the suffering servant and that they have a part to play in God's redemptive plan.

Now, the application for us is quite simple, if this is the mission of Christ and if the mission of the church is to obey God to fulfill the purpose of Christ, then we should be concerned with carrying out this strategy in our day. This means that our churches should reflect the diversity of the community. We do not believe that Jesus died to redeem only a certain KIND of people in Dinwiddie or the surrounding areas. We believe that the body of Christ should reflect the diverse nature of the mission of Christ and our local bodies should as well (to the degree that there is diversity in the community. Second, we believe that we are still to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth because there are people living in those places who desperately need to hear about Jesus and for whom Jesus died! This is the reason why the church cannot, and should not, be content with merely reaching their specific locality. Our mission is global, and our efforts should reflect the heart of God who died for men from every locality under the sun.

**September 3**

**2 Timothy 1:8-9**

I want to deal with two aspects of the sermon that I'm not sure if I got to on Sunday or not (side note, one of the challenges of writing these devotions a week early is that we never really know how things "play out"). The first issue deals with how we are saved by grace through faith and the second issue (tomorrow's devotion) deals with the resulting holiness that springs forth from the realization of true salvation.

Today's text dovetails nicely with Peter's statement in Acts 15:11 where he claims, "we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." Do you see what he is getting at in this assertion? Peter is reminding true believers that their salvation is not tied to some work of merit, they are saved solely because of Jesus' grace applied to them through faith. Whenever a person stands up and attempts to add something to that salvation, whenever someone adds a condition that must be met for salvation that adds to the sufficiency of Christ, they are preaching another gospel altogether.

Paul's reminder to Timothy serves to buttress us against such attacks. Here the Apostle encourages Timothy to stand on the truth that God saved us "not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace, which He gave to us in Christ Jesus..." We would be wise to recognize two things about this statement. First, we are not saved by works. If circumcision, or any other human act, is necessary for salvation then we are preaching and teaching a works-based gospel. We cannot claim that a person is saved by grace alone and then add conditions to their salvation.

Second, notice how Paul hammers this idea home with his language. We are saved not "because of our works" but because of what God "gave us". Salvation is a gift. A gift is not earned, a gift is not warranted, and a gift cannot be bartered. A true gift is given by the good pleasure of another. This is so important to standing on Gospel truth. We cannot force God's hand, nor can we merit salvation, instead the Lord Sovereignly chooses who to bless and He does this by His grace alone.

Church family, I pray we continue to stand on this Gospel. May we never communicate to the masses that there are other conditions for their salvation. May we realize and emphasize the reality that Jesus gives the gift of salvation freely and may we celebrate when those who are undeserving enjoy His favor. After all, we are in the camp of the undeserving ourselves prior to the grace of God in Christ descending on our sin-ravaged souls.



**September 4**

**Galatians 5:16 & 22-23**

I could almost hear the screams of protest to this week's sermon and devotions from some of you. As I typed yesterday's entry, I was thinking about those who would respond, "but what about holiness!?!?" Surely our pastors don't believe that we can live however we want! Surely, they recognize the biblical imperatives that command us to live holy, obedient lives. How can we say that people are simply saved by grace AND that holiness is a necessary aspect of salvation? The answer is found in the order.

You see, the problem in Acts 15 is one of entry. Can a Gentile enter the people of God without being circumcised. Stated differently, aren't there conditions for their salvation? The answer to that question is no! There are no actions that must precede our salvation. We are saved by grace through faith alone.

Now our salvation ALWAYS results in obedience. Catch this, its so important, we are not saved by our works but our salvation results in our faithful works. Holiness (which includes faithful living) is not a condition but an overflow or natural and necessary result. So, what do we do with the numerous biblical passages that command our obedience? We submit to them, in Christ. We confess that salvation is the bound up in regeneration whereby God changes our hearts and indwells us in His Spirit and that salvation then is worked out in our good works after we are saved. We are not saved BY our works, but we are saved TO good works that God empowers and directs us to as His blood bought and renewed children.

Notice how Paul summarizes this idea nicely by teaching on the fruit of the Spirit. Fruit is the product of a tree (or vine). It is the result of a plant that is rooted and nurtured. You do not create a tree by fruit instead the tree produces fruit. In the same way, God does not require that we must good fruit from an otherwise bad tree (symbolizing our lives before Christ) in fact, the Bible says this is impossible! Instead, we produce good, holy works from a life that has been saved and transformed. This means that holiness is imperative to salvation but not as acts of merit but as acts that indicate the power of God transforming our lives.

This has massive implications. The Pharisees wanted to point the imperatives of holiness to the Gentiles so that they would earn God's gift, but the Apostles directed the Gentiles to believe on Christ and, after they were converted, to follow Him through the power of the Spirit that they were given at salvation. Holiness was important to them (see v. 20-21) but the order of holiness was imperative as well. When we preach the Gospel, we preach a message of grace. God gives us salvation but this salvation that He gives results in good works.

I can't say it any better than the great Reformer and champion of the Gospel, Martin Luther who famously wrote "we are saved by grace through faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone." If you are truly saved, your actions will demonstrate (imperfectly, but genuinely) a life that has been changed by God's gift of Christ.