

Father Abraham

Romans 4:9-12

November 30th, 2008

Scripture

“Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.”

As I prepared for this passage of Scripture and it being the Thanksgiving holiday, I could not help but remember the story of a mother who was cooking the ham on Thanksgiving morning. She got the ham out of the refrigerator and the knife out of the drawer and cut both ends of the ham off and put it in the pan to cook. Her daughter was watching as she had agreed to let her help with the dinner. The little girl simply said, “Mom why did you cut both ends of the ham off?” The mother replied, “Well, that is how my mom does it.” The young girl said “Why does Grandma do it that way?” The mother said she wasn’t sure but she could call and ask her. Mom dialed the phone and Grandma got on the phone with the little girl. The girl said, “Grandma, why do you cut the ends off the ham before you

cook it?" Grandma said, "Well, that's how Granny always did it." The little girl asked why. Grandma said, "I don't know, but she will be at dinner so you can ask her." Now Granny was almost 100 years old and still in good enough health to be at Thanksgiving dinner. You can imagine what the little great-granddaughter could not wait to do! It was not 5 minutes after Granny got there that the little girl sat down beside her and said, "Granny, I asked Mom why she cut both ends of the ham off before she cooked it and she said because Grandma did. I asked Grandma and she said she did because you did. Granny, why did you do that?" she looked at her great-granddaughter and said, "Because the pan was not big enough for the ham."

Isn't it amazing how sometimes you don't get to the truth until you get to the source? Isn't it amazing how sometimes we can do things because the people before us did it without us really understanding why, and we just accept that is just the way it is? It is humorous when we think about cooking, but it isn't when we think about person after person who accept what someone has told them before about their faith and them not really understand why they believe what they believe.

The Apostle Paul knew that in the church at Rome there were a certain percentage of Jewish people. Paul has labored in Romans 4 to tell us that salvation is not by human works at all. He takes us back to the source of Abraham. He opens the Jewish Bible and shows the Jew that Abraham was not saved by works. But sometimes even when you know something is true, if you have believed it over a long period of time, it is just hard to get that out of your mind.

It has been a crazy couple weeks. It seems like every time I have turned around there has been a death in the church. We have done several funerals and have been in several funeral processions. I am still amazed when I am leading a procession out to the cemetery that cars still pull over to the side of the road when they see the hearse. I know they think they are pulling over out of respect, but I know that is not really why we do it

as an American society. That custom of pulling over to the side of the road when a funeral procession passes by started back in the day of the horse drawn carriage. It started even before two lane roads when there was just one lane. When they put the coffin in the carriage, it made the carriage top heavy. So when they would take the carriage out to the cemetery and meet another carriage, someone had to pull over. If the carriage with the body pulled over it might tip over. Back in the olden days many times neighbors would have to turn a carriage back over because it had tipped over when someone would not yield to it, so out of safety we began to pull over. I still pull over. I still cannot pass a funeral procession going down a four lane highway because I still think I am doing what I am doing out of respect, even though I know that is not why the tradition was started. You see, we are thinking in a Baptist Church: Paul, just move on. But Paul knows that if you have been taught all of your life that you add something to your salvation, when you are first confronted with the truth, it is hard. It is hard to believe that, it is hard to get it. Some of us have been sitting in grace based churches all of our lives and we still do not get it. So Paul is laboring here to tell us that not only is salvation not dependent on human works, that neither is it dependent on divine ordinances.

Paul says, "*Is this blessing*", what blessing? The blessing of knowing that every time you have intentionally stepped over a boundary, every time you have fallen short of the standard, every one of those acts of sin has been covered by the blood of Christ. It has been forgiven. To know that when you stand before God on the day of judgment, and He opens up that divine ledger, there will not be a single sin that you have done here on earth put into your spiritual account. Is that a blessing or what? The blessing is to live totally forgiven, and totally free from sin. Paul says, "*Is this blessing of salvation only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?*" Now in this arena, in this argument, we know the word circumcised refers to the Jew, and the word uncircumcised refers to the Gentile. He is basically asking if they believe that salvation is only for the Jew, or is it also possible that God justifies Gentiles as well. Now if you remember in chapter 3:29-

30, he has already told us that God is not the God of the Jew only; He is also the God of the Gentile because He is one God. Because He is one God, there is only one way to Him. And that is through faith, whether you are a Jew or a Gentile. This is why in Romans 1, 2, and 3, Paul told us that all Jews and Gentiles have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Therefore, if all have sinned, then when Jesus died, He did not just die for the Jew. He did not just die for some; He died for all, Jew and Gentile alike.

Now he is saying whether you are Jew or Gentile, you have to come to God the same way, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. He will prove to the Jew that God is also the God of the Gentile. He again takes them back to their Bible, and tells them that Abraham was counted righteous at the moment of faith. Then he asked, "*How then was it counted to him?*" In other words, how was righteousness put into his account? Was it before circumcision or after circumcision? Notice Paul is bringing in divine ordinances. I can understand knowing there is not anything we can do on our own to make us right with God, but if God has given us divine ordinances, then is it possible they play a part in making us right with God? I believe this paragraph is one of the most important paragraphs you need to understand to help your family and friends see the truth that salvation is not in church ordinances, even though they have been divinely given. Many of us used to be under the teaching that it was something we did following a church ordinance that actually made us right with God, rather than simply trusting in Christ as our Lord and Savior. This says that Abraham was not made right after he was circumcised; he was made right before he was circumcised.

I have entitled this message Father Abraham, I really wanted to title it, Do the Math. I am amazed how some people cannot spiritually add, and it is so simple. I do not have much mercy for the Jew. I just do not see how he did not get it. I mean, he has a book, and in that book it tells how Father Abraham came to salvation. He came to it by faith. God stepped into Father Abraham's life and said here is what is going to happen, and

Abraham said amen, and the Bible says God brought him into a right relationship with Him. But the Jews interpreted the Old Testament to say that Abraham was not made right with God until after he was circumcised. But I have done the math, and that is what the Apostle Paul says here. He said to do the math. I found it intriguing that he did not ask when was Abraham made right. He asked how then was Abraham made right. His answer will involve time, but time is not what is important here. What is important here is circumstance. Are you with me? We are going to do some math and I do not want you to see that this was just a question of the time of when he was made righteous, but how he was made righteous.

Abraham was made right with God while he was still circumcised. He was circumcised when he was 99 years old according to Genesis 17. Can I just say, Ouch! His son Ishmael was 13. But we know Abraham got right with God in Genesis 15:6. Now we know that in Genesis 15:6 he did not have a son yet. We know in Genesis 16 that he and Sarah and Hagar are going to work it out to where he can have a son. When Ishmael is born, Abraham is 86 years old. Genesis 16 comes between 15 and 17. In Genesis 17 he is circumcised at 99. In Genesis 16 he is 86 when Ishmael is born. This means he had to probably be 85 when she conceived. We know in Genesis 12 that he left Haran when he was 75. Now somewhere between 75 and 85 years of age he sees the vision and gets right with God. But we can say without a doubt that he was not circumcised until at least 14 years after he was made right with God. So the question is: did circumcision play any part in making Abraham right with God? The answer is no. So if Abraham is the father of the Jew and circumcision did not play in his salvation, then why are you thinking it is a part of your salvation? You say now wait, none of us believe that circumcision has anything to do with salvation. But you know what some of us do believe? Some of us believe that divine ordinances do play a part of our salvation. That is wrong. You say that you do not believe that, but you have a family member, neighbor, or co-worker who does. From time to time they just ask, and we are supposed to be ready to give an answer of the hope of the truth that is in us. We need to understand

from Romans 4 that Paul is clearly teaching us how to talk to someone who is trusting in something they should not be trusting in for their salvation. The Bible says that Abraham is the father of all who believe, whether you are circumcised or uncircumcised. So we all look to Abraham to see God's plan of salvation. Abraham was saved by faith in the revelation of God. He is made right with God at the moment of faith. Do you understand this? The moment God stepped into Abraham's life and revealed what He did for him, Abraham believed. The moment he believed, God put righteousness into his spiritual bank account. At that moment God did not view him as a pagan or a sinner anymore, God viewed him as forgiven through the blood that would be shed on Calvary's cross years later. Here he is, still uncircumcised, walking with God, called the friend of God for 14 years, and then God steps into his life and says He would give him a sign. The sign is circumcision. It will be a sign of the covenant that He has made with him.

Now remember, the covenant that God made with Abraham was an unconditional covenant. It was not based on any condition that Abraham kept, but it was based on the conditions that God would keep. It was a unilateral covenant. It was not a covenant that Abraham made with God, but it was a covenant that God made with Abraham. Therefore it is not bilateral; it is unilateral, meaning God is the one responsible for the conditions of the covenant. Circumcision was given as a sign, but Paul says that he had received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness he had by faith while still being uncircumcised. So when he receives the divine ordinance of circumcision, he is already right with God by faith but still in an uncircumcised state. Now, what is circumcision? It is a sign.

Signs are not the reality. Signs are signs. As a matter of fact, signs kind of serve as identifiers, or things that point toward reality. For example, when we go to Orlando, I love when I see that sign: Orlando-200 miles. When I see the sign that tells me Orlando is 200 miles I am not in Orlando yet. The sign is not Orlando; it just points me toward Orlando. When I finally get to Orlando, I finally see the sign Orlando. We never stop and camp around

the sign. The sign just tells me about the reality that I am now in Orlando. It points me toward the reality that I finally arrived. I am in Orlando.

I did not realize how powerful signs were until several years ago when I quit wearing my wedding ring. I thought I had a good reason, can I plead ignorance here? Early in our marriage I jumped off a grain truck but my ring got caught on the sideboard and I almost tore my finger off. I honestly thought that justified coming home and telling Celisa that I did not think I needed to wear my wedding ring anymore. She agreed but I could tell she did not really agree. So for several years I did not wear a wedding ring. One day I put it on and I will never forget this because I thought she was the only person in the world that would be thrilled when I put that wedding ring on. But when I preached that first message after not wearing a wedding ring for years, I had at least 20 ladies come up to me after service and thank me for putting my ring back on. I did not have a clue! You see this wedding ring? That is not the reality of my marriage to Celisa. But it is the sign of my marriage to Celisa. It is the symbol of my marriage to Celisa. Hey guys, I knew that for me personally I did not need something on my hand to know I am married to a great lady, but evidently other people do.

That is what signs do. They point people to the reality of marriage. They point people to the reality of covenants. They point people to the reality of a relationship with God, and that is why God had Abraham circumcised. It was to be a sign, and to demonstrate publicly there had been a covenant made between Abraham and God. Abraham knew he had that covenant with God, but God wanted others to know. This sign of circumcision would be so powerful it would be more than just a mere symbol. It would actually serve as a seal. The sign of circumcision would serve as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while still being uncircumcised. Now the seal in the biblical world denoted authenticity, genuineness, and ownership. Praise God we have baptism now and not circumcision. Can you imagine what Abraham's circumcision said to his family and servants? When they removed that skin, it said this guy has been separated from

you. He has been separated from the world. He is not his own now. He belongs to God. That is what divine ordinances are for. They are to point people to the reality of who's we are. They are signs of the reality of who we trust in to make us right with God. We do not trust in the symbol, or the seal, or the sign. We trust in the reality, and the reality is God. I know we live in a culture where this is getting more and more unpopular, but I am telling you, the crux of Christianity is that God justifies the ungodly! While I was ungodly, God stepped into my life and revealed to me what He did for me in His Son. When I responded by faith, God brought me into a right relationship with Him just like He did Father Abraham. The reason the circumcision of Abraham is so important for us who are pagans is that it gives us hope! I do not have to have a religious heritage to be made right with God. My being right with God has nothing to do with what my mom and dad did, or what my granddaddy believed. I can come to God at the moment of faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of my religious past. But even if I have a religion, there is hope for me. While I have been through the ordinances, I can still be saved if I will follow in the footsteps of believing Abraham. Not trusting in the ordinances, but trusting in the God of the ordinances to bring me into a right relationship with Him because of what He did for me on the cross.

I know you are wondering why we need a sermon about circumcision. We need it because I believe we can just as easily substitute baptism and the Lord's Supper into this thought. There are some of you that were raised to believe that your baptism was part of your justification. Even though you are in a grace church now it is still hard to get over that. Some of you were taught that unless you sit down at the table of the Lord every week you are just not right with God, or not in a right church. You have faith in the ordinances. Listen to me, if the plan of salvation today was faith plus baptism, or faith plus anything else, the Apostle Paul would have never used Abraham of the Old Testament as an example of how men are made right with God. Are you listening to me? In the Old Testament it was faith, then righteousness, then the ordinance. If today it is faith plus the

ordinance, then to be made righteous, Paul would be wrong to use Abraham as an example of salvation. The problem is that sometimes those who have the revelation think those who do not have the revelation have to be like them in order to be right. This verse is teaching that if you had the revelation, you cannot be saved until you become like the pagan. The Jew thought the Gentile had to become a Jew to be saved. Paul is saying that if you are a Jew, you have to become like a Gentile. This means you have to recognize that just because you have the ordinance of circumcision it did not do anything for you if you do not have faith. It was not a supplement to your faith. It was a sign, a symbol, and the seal of the righteousness that you had the moment of faith. Now we have two extremes in our churches.

1. I believe I am not made right with God because my faith is not complete until I go down into the waters of baptism. It is in the waters of baptism that God makes me right with Him. Once I have been through the waters to get right with God, I am not right with Him, and do not stay right with Him unless I sit down at the table of the Lord on a regular basis.

These verses blow that out of the water. If you are not right with God before you get into that water, the getting into the water absolutely did you no good. The getting into the water today is evidence of the righteousness you already have by faith. Sitting down at the table of Lord does not impute any benefit of the death of Christ to you. It says you are drinking of the fruit of the vine and eating the unleavened bread because the death of Christ has been imputed to you by faith.

2. If it is just a sign of the reality, then it really is not important.

This is the other extreme, and there are a bunch of you here. Do you know why Abraham waited 14 years before he got circumcised? That is when God told him to be circumcised. He got circumcised the day God told him to. God tells you to be baptized as a believer right after your faith. Some of you believe that it is not the reality. The reality is I am right with God and

it is just a symbol, so you do not get baptized. God help you. Your baptism is a sign of the righteousness you have because of the blood of Jesus applied to you. How dare you think it is not important because it is not part of justification! It is the beginning of your sanctification.

Do you know what breaks my heart the most about this church? There are very few things that break my heart about this church, but this does and always will. I will never be satisfied. We can almost fill this place up three times on Sunday morning, and on the first Sunday night of the month when we sit down at the table of the Lord to publicly declare that our faith is in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, we do not even have enough people to fill the pews up once. Some of you have not been to the table of the Lord since I have been pastor here because you fell into that lie that says signs are not important and symbols do not matter.

If you want to go to Orlando you can go anyway you want to go. But if you are going to be a disciple of Christ, do not bring your attitude or view into this. If we are going to be followers of Christ, we have to go by what God tells us because that is all we have. We are going to be a reformed church that is not going to swing from one extreme of the ordinances to the other. We are going to be the church that is balanced. We are going to be biblical and wear our baptism, and sit down at the table of the Lord to identify to the world who's we are. At the moment of faith, that sign of baptism and the Lord's Supper is a sign that says to the world that you are under new management! Some of us ticked our neighbors off when we were under the management of sin. But now that we are under the management of the Lord Jesus, God wants them to see that we have a new atmosphere. The place is not dirty anymore, the place is clean. God wants the world to know that we eat differently than we used to, and we are here to serve them. That is why the sign is important. Are you right with God? Have you signified that by believer's baptism? It is not a baptism before faith, but after faith. Baptism before faith is not baptism, it is just getting wet. Baptism in the New Testament is for believers only, by immersion.