

Romans 4:9-12

Abraham – the Father of All Who Believe

It is amazing to see what some people believe it takes to gain favor with God¹

Take, for instance, the Shrine of Guadalupe in Mexico (no kin to Simon's wife!)

- This shrine is built over the place where Mary supposedly appeared on one occasion

Every year, thousands of people crawl on their hands and knees for a quarter of a mile to the shrine

- That is from the church to Lowe's
- On your knees

Why would someone crawl for a ¼ mile on their knees to visit the Shrine of Guadalupe?

- They hope that Mary will intercede for them

Or consider the Hindu festival Maha Kumbh Mela

- It is celebrated every 12 years where two bodies of water come together
- This festival has been called the world's largest single religious event

Holy men lead multitudes of followers down to the chilly waters

- Religious extremists sit on beds of nails, walk over broken glass, and lie down on hot coals
- Some worshippers stare at the sun until they go blind
- One man held his arms upright for 8 years

Why would people subject themselves to this torture?

- One Hindu holy book says, "Those who bathe at the conflux of the black and white river, the Ganga and the Yamuna, go to heaven."
- Another sacred writing says, "the pilgrim who bathes at this place wins absolution for his whole family, and even if he has perpetrated a hundred crimes, he is redeemed the moment he touches the Ganga, whose waters wash away his sins."

During this festival, the waterfront is lined with numerous shaving booths

- The devoted followers shave themselves of every hair on their bodies, including eyebrows and eyelashes
- Every shaved hair is gathered and thrown into the filthy waters

Why would they do shave their bodies, you ask?

- Hindu writings assure pilgrims that "for every hair thus thrown in, you are promised a million years residence in heaven."

The way to find favor with God, according to these two religions, is through human works

- Crawling on your knees
- Sitting on beds of nails
- Walking over broken glass
- Lying down on hot coals
- Holding your arms upright for years
- Shaving off every hair on your body

¹ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur NT Commentary, Romans 1-8*, 246-47.

Think of the millions of people who have bought into these Satanic lies

- These individuals truly believe that they can have favor with God through these religious efforts
- But they are wrong

We are in the second major division of the epistle of Romans that deals with justification by faith

- How sinful, condemned individuals can be declared righteous in the sight of God

God is holy and righteous

- He cannot look upon sin
- Neither can He simply excuse sin

The only way for sinners to be made righteous in the sight of God is through simple, childlike belief in the Lord Jesus Christ

- Believing that His work on the cross satisfied the just demands of a holy God
- Believing that His work on the cross alone was sufficient to atone for sin
- Believing that there is nothing that you and I could ever do to merit His grace in our lives

Any time that our works or character is factored into the equation of justification, we have an unbiblical calculation

- Biblical math is faith = righteousness
- Unbiblical math is faith + my works = righteousness

In order to prove his point, the apostle Paul referenced the greatest passage of the Old Testament on the issue of justification by faith alone

- The text is Genesis 15:6, which deals with Abraham's faith being reckoned as righteousness by God Himself

Read Romans 4:9-12

The Jews obviously trace their heritage back to Abraham

- Some Jews believed that Abraham's faith merited favor with God
- Some Jews believed that Abraham was sinless and didn't need repentance

But Paul makes an incredible statement about the issue of justification

- The apostle speaks of God as He "**who justifies the ungodly**" (Ro 4:5)

For the Jews to admit that Abraham was an "**ungodly**" person in need of salvation himself was admittedly difficult

- But the Jews needed to realize that Abraham was himself a sinner in need of God's grace

As a sinner in need of God's grace, how was God's salvation appropriated in his life?

- Not through human works
- Not through obedience to the Law

This morning, Paul will reiterate a crucial point that he made in chapters 2 and 3

- The act of circumcision cannot be the basis for Abraham's justification

Once again, the apostle will cite that pivotal passage in Genesis 15:6 as proof for this conclusion

- The point of this morning's message is the relationship between Abraham's justification and his circumcision

Romans 4:9-12 help us to answer four (4) key questions about this topic of justification and circumcision

- To whom does the promise of forgiveness apply? (4:9)
- Must a person be circumcised in order to be justified? (4:10)
- What is the purpose of circumcision? (4:11)
- Who are the spiritual children of Abraham? (4:12)

I. To whom does the promise of forgiveness apply? (4:9)

⁹Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also?

The apostle Paul opens by asking a pertinent question, “Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also?”

Paul has used Abraham as the best illustration of an Old Covenant sinner declared righteous on the basis of faith alone

- We saw that last week as we studied Romans 4:1-8

But Paul also referenced another Old Testament giant – King David

- Romans 4:7-8 cite Psalm 32:1-2
- Psalm 32 is a Davidic psalm which chronicles the blessings of forgiveness

So we ask ourselves, “To whom does the promise of forgiveness apply?”

- Was this a blessing restricted exclusively to the Jews?
- Were Gentiles also included in this blessing?

The Jewish teaching was that only the Jews could look forward to this blessing²

- After all, they were the circumcised

To answer this question, Paul reverts back to Genesis 15:6, as we see in the latter half of Romans 4:9

For we say, “FAITH WAS RECKONED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

Paul continually refers to this OT text

- Without a shadow of a doubt, it shows that Abraham was declared righteous solely on the basis of faith alone

Abraham lived hundreds of years before the Law

- So that couldn't be the standard

No human act of Abraham is mentioned in Genesis 15

- Boasting is excluded

² Everett F. Harrison, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Romans*, 50.

Paul's use of Psalm 32 shows that the benefits of forgiveness apply to everyone who believes

- His proof is none other than Abraham

Abraham and David were both sinners

- Yet both of them experienced God's grace

Only those who have been declared righteous experience forgiveness

- It is impossible to achieve forgiveness apart from forensic justification from God

Even those of us who live in the New Covenant can relate to the twin passages of Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:1-2

- We, like Abraham, are declared righteous simply on the basis of faith alone
- We, like David, can praise God for the blessings of forgiveness, which comes as a by-product of justification

As we anticipate the celebration of the Lord's Table at the end of this service, our hearts should be filled with praise

- We are those whose transgressions have been forgiven!
- Our sins have been covered!

II. Must a person be circumcised in order to be justified? (4:10)

¹⁰How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised?

The Jews had no problem acknowledging that Abraham was justified on the basis of faith

- But the Jews believed that Abraham's circumcision added special merit to his righteous status before God

So we ask ourselves, "Must a person be circumcised in order to be justified?"

- Is it imperative that a person become circumcised in order to be forgiven?

This was a real issue in early Church history

- In Acts 15:1, we are told that "**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'**"

Jewish teaching during Paul's day taught that circumcision was necessary in order to be saved³

- "Circumcision saves from hell"
- "Abraham sits before the gate of hell, and does not allow that any circumcised Israelite should enter there"

Do you see how the Jews placed extra emphasis on the rite of circumcision?

- Faith + circumcision = righteousness
- That's unbiblical math!

As we look at the life of Paul, we acknowledge that he himself was circumcised

- "**circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee**" (Php 3:5)

³ MacArthur, 248.

But Paul understood the significance of circumcision

- Most of the Jews of his day did not

A popular Jewish writing records these words, “And every one that is born, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day, belongs not to the children of the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham, but to the children of destruction; nor is there, moreover, any sign on him that he is the Lord’s”⁴

This helps us to see the importance that the Jews attached to this physical, outward rite of circumcision

To prove his point, Paul once again uses Abraham as his primary illustration

In what physical condition was Abraham when he was declared righteous?

- Was he circumcised or uncircumcised?

Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised:

It doesn’t take a Bible scholar to figure out that Abraham was uncircumcised when he was declared righteous in Genesis 15:6

- He was ninety-nine (99) when he was circumcised (Gen 17:24)
- At the time of Abram’s faith, Ishmael hadn’t been born

Some Jewish readings said that the period of time was twenty-nine (29) years⁵

At a minimum, a period of at least 13 years existed between his belief and his circumcision

- This is critical for us to remember as we march through this passage

Abraham was an uncircumcised pagan when he believed

- There was no such thing as a Jew when he was declared righteous

The Jews trace their lineage back to this man

- Some Jews still think that Abraham was a perfect, sinless individual who merited favor with God on the basis of his faith and circumcision

But the reality is quite opposite their thinking

- Abraham was a pagan who was raised to believe in many gods
- Abraham was a sinner who had not obeyed God’s call perfectly
- Abraham had nothing within him to cause God to extend grace and mercy to him
- Abraham was uncircumcised when he believed

So the principle that Paul is seeking to establish is quite simple

- *God declared an uncircumcised sinner righteous on the basis of Abraham’s faith alone, totally apart from the Law, human works, and circumcision*

Let’s repeat question #2, “Must a person be circumcised in order to be justified?”

- Abraham proves the point beautifully, doesn’t he?
- The answer is categorically, “No!”

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 201.

⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *NAC, Vol 27*, 125.

We also think about the thief on the cross

- A few breaths away from eternity, he expressed faith and trust in Jesus Christ
- He acknowledged his sin and the sinlessness of Christ

Did Christ tell this man to be circumcised before he could believe?

- No
- Jesus told this sinner, "**Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise**" (Lk 23:43)

Abraham and the thief expressed faith in God to save them from their sins

- And that's the same way for you to experience God's forgiveness

III. What is the purpose of circumcision? (4:11)

¹¹ and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.

At this point, a Jew may be thinking, "Ok, Paul...if Abraham was declared righteous based on his faith alone, why did God command him to be circumcised?"

- That's a fair question, isn't it?

We can't underestimate the importance of God's command for Abraham to become circumcised

- But we can't overestimate its importance, either

So what is the purpose of circumcision?

- Why did God command Abraham to become circumcised, especially since he was declared righteous at least thirteen (13) years prior?

There are two important, key words in verse 11 that will help to answer that question

- "**sign**" and "**seal**"

These two words will help to unlock the meaning of circumcision

- They will help us to understand what God's original plan was for this rite

First, we have to admit that Israel was not the first nation to have its males circumcised

- Other nations were already practicing circumcision long before God required it of Abram⁶

As a "**sign**," circumcision pointed to a reality other than itself

- It was a sign of the covenant that God made with Abram

A "**seal**" was used in different manners during Biblical times⁷

- It was a mark of ownership
- It was a means of attestation and authentication

Paul spoke of the Corinthian church, saying, "**you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord**" (1 Co 9:2)

- The church was a visible witness of God working in and through the apostle Paul
- The church was the confirmation and authentication of Paul's ministry⁸

⁶ Morris, 202.

⁷ Morris, 202-03.

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *NICNT, Romans*, 269.

In a similar manner, Paul could speak of Abraham's circumcision as being a "seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised"

- Circumcision was not the basis for his righteous standing
- But circumcision confirmed and authenticated it

Compare this to baptism, for example

- In and of itself, water baptism means nothing

The proper meaning of water baptism is the first act of obedience for a believer

- A believer is identifying himself as belonging to the Lord
- A believer is proclaiming that he has been born again

The baptismal waters don't save anyone

- The ordinance of baptism is a beautiful portrait of what took place at conversion
- It is an event that looks to the past

Baptism and the Lord's Table are both events that look to an event in the past

- Baptism points to a person's conversion
- The Lord's Table points to the death of Jesus Christ

Circumcision also points to a past event

- It points back to Abraham's initial faith in the LORD
- It points back to Abraham's righteous standing with God

As Gentiles, we don't normally talk about circumcision

- We are more apt to talk about baptism and the Lord's Supper

These two ordinances, like circumcision, are often misunderstood as to their meaning

- Some would say that baptism and/or participation in the Lord's Table guarantees you forgiveness of sins

But baptism and the Lord's Table are simply outward manifestations, pointing to something beyond themselves

- The water, bread, and juice can't save anyone
- They remind us of the death of Christ

that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them.

The result of God's plan with Abraham was that he would become "the father of all who believe without being circumcised"

- This includes all of us who are Gentiles

We remember the word of God to Abram in Genesis 17, "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations" (Ge 17:4-5, emphasis mine)

- On two occasions there in Genesis 17, God promised Abram that he would be "the father of a multitude of many nations"

Israel was only one nation

- Abraham would become the father of many nations

If the Jews were the only ones who could claim Abraham as their father, then what does this say about God's promise?⁹

- It would, in essence, nullify God's promise of making Abraham "the father of a multitude of many nations"

The common denominator was the call to believe in the LORD

- Just like Abraham

As hard as it was for the Jews to accept, Abraham was the father of many Gentiles

- He wasn't their physical father
- He was their spiritual father

Isn't it funny that the Gentiles are the first to be referred to as the children of Abraham?¹⁰

- The believing Gentiles are mentioned in verse 11
- The believing Jews aren't mentioned until verse 12

The Jews prided themselves on being in the right family tree

- But physical lineage never guarantees forgiveness

The Jews taught that a Gentile must become like a Jew before forgiveness could be granted

- In a touch of irony, the apostle Paul reverses that order
- The Jews must become like the Gentile Abram, simply believing in the LORD¹¹

Physical circumcision was never designed to be a means of attaining righteousness

- That wasn't the case with Abraham
- That isn't the case with anyone after him

Abraham was justified while he was uncircumcised

- For at least thirteen (13) years after his belief, he remained uncircumcised

But God initiated this act of circumcision in order to mark those who were part of the covenant family of God

- Not the removal of skin from the male body
- But the removal of sin from the heart

IV. Who are the spiritual children of Abraham? (4:12)

¹²and 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.

There is a song that the young children sing, entitled, "Father Abraham"

- "Father Abraham, had many sons; many sons had Father Abraham"

As you listen to those words, we acknowledge the truth that is contained therein

- God told Abraham that he would be the father of many nations

⁹ Alan F. Johnson, *Everyman's Bible Commentary, Romans*, 84.

¹⁰ Moo, 270.

¹¹ Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace*, 115-16.

But what about the Jews?

- Was Abraham their father?

From a physical perspective, you could say that Abraham was their father

- Jews traced their physical lineage all the way back to Abraham

As we have noted already, however, physical lineage is no guarantee of spiritual relationship

- Just because many Jews are in the physical lineage of Abraham does not guarantee that they would be in the same spiritual family as Abraham

This is why Paul stated in Romans 2, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God." (Ro 2:28-29)

A Jew could be from the right family, have access to the OT revelation, and be circumcised, yet still not believe

- Without belief, that Jew is not a true child of Abraham

Yet a believing Gentile could be from the wrong family, not have access to the OT revelation, be uncircumcised, and have the assurance of forgiveness of sins through faith alone

- This is what infuriated the Jews

A true Jew, as Paul points out here in verse 12, is one who has decided to "follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised"

To "follow in the steps" was a military phrase¹²

- It meant "to fall into rank"

We have all seen pictures or video of soldiers standing in formation

- Their lines are straight as an arrow
- They align themselves behind the person in front of them

When soldiers march, they are in step with one another

- Someone is oftentimes heard repeating the cadence for others to follow

That is precisely the picture that Paul wants to provide for the Jews

- They claim to follow Abraham
- But they don't

The Jews were out of step and out of line in their formation

- They claimed to follow Abraham
- But they had misunderstood what it means to be a true child of Abraham

Abraham was declared righteous long before his circumcision

- Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn, was circumcised
- But Ishmael was not part of the spiritual family of Abraham¹³

¹² Morris, 204.

¹³ MacArthur, 251.

I find it important that Paul did not say, “follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had at his circumcision”

- This would have left the door wide open for the Jews to attach too high of a value to circumcision

Paul knew that there was a period of at least thirteen (13) years between Abraham’s belief and his circumcision

- The Jews neglected to ponder the significance of this period of time

The apostle was warning the Jews that it was entirely possible for them to become circumcised, yet remain in unbelief

- Circumcision, in and of itself, could not guarantee a righteous standing with God

Verse 11 displayed the truth that even uncircumcised Gentiles could be called the children of Abraham

We have sought to answer four key questions this morning

1. To whom does the promise of forgiveness apply?

God promises forgiveness to all who believe Him

- Regardless of whether you are circumcised or not

2. Must a person be circumcised in order to be justified?

It is not necessary for a person to be circumcised in order to be declared righteous in the sight of God

- Abraham, David, and the thief on the cross illustrate this point

Furthermore, the Jerusalem Council resolved this issue early on in the book of Acts

- The apostles and the elders determined that circumcision was not to be required from Gentiles

3. What is the purpose of circumcision?

Circumcision was simply a “**sign**” and a “**seal**”

- It was a physical act that pointed to something beyond itself

Moses wrote in the book of Deuteronomy, "**Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants...**" (Dt 30:6)

The physical removal of skin was a necessary reminder of the need to deal with sin

- It was never designed to be the basis for our justification

4. Who are the spiritual children of Abraham?

Those who believe – regardless of circumcision or uncircumcision – are the true children of Abraham

- They have placed trust in the Lord for forgiveness of sins

Romans 1:16-17 ring true once again, "**For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith’**" (Ro 1:16-17)

One final question begs to be asked, "Are your sins forgiven?"

- On what do you base your answer?

Are you trusting in something you have done to gain merit with God?

- Attending or joining a church
- Contributing to a charitable organization
- Trying to be a good person
- Reading the Bible
- Praying to God

Genesis 15:6 is so simple that its premise could be misunderstood

- Abram "**believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness**" (Ge 15:6)

Abraham is the model believer

- Not because of the man
- But because God declared him righteous simply on the basis of his faith

It could be that you are here this morning trusting in something other than Jesus Christ to atone for your sins

- If that describes you, I would exhort you to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ right now

Believe that He lived a perfect, sinless life

- Believe that He died on the cross as a Substitute for sinners like yourself
- Believe that He rose on the third day to prove victorious over death, hell, and the grave

I would encourage you to take your bulletin and flip it over to the back page

- We have given you several verses which outline the Gospel

You don't need to be circumcised in order to be saved

- You just need to believe
- Just like Abraham