
“Footsteps of Faith”

ROMANS 4:9-12

FEBRUARY 19, 2023

PASTOR BRIAN SMITH

WILDWOOD CHURCH

EAST MOLINE, ILLINOIS

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

Abraham was justified by faith. Circumcision, which came years later, was only a sign meant to seal, or authenticate the righteousness Abraham had by faith. Everyone who has faith in Christ is likewise declared righteous without ever performing any religious work whatsoever. Do you hope that religious rituals, of any kind, will save you? Or do you trust in Christ? We encourage you to walk in the footsteps of faith of Abraham!

INTRODUCTION

It's important to me that you know that when Pastor Andrew and I plan worship services, we are not seeking to manufacture anything. We do plan, but there are times when things come together without our planning. This is what has happened today. Today we observed baptisms and celebrated several people joining Wildwood in membership. We're also observing the Lord's Supper and in our passage today, we're going to learn about religious rituals and how they relate to our salvation.

We set the membership process schedule last April or June sometime and you may have noticed we have moved to observing communion every other week. When I plan my Romans' series, I only look about 4-6 weeks out. All that to say, this feels like a divinely-ordained convergence of the ordinances of the church and our text. I just want to acknowledge this to express gratitude to the Lord.

You might also have heard about the revival in Asbury University in Kentucky. I don't know what to think about it just yet. On the one hand, in the wisdom of Gamaliel, if this is a move of man it will simply disappear. On the other, if it is a move of God, we do not want to be found resisting it. Time will tell if the Holy Spirit is sending a revival. What is plain is that revival will turn the hearts of people to God in repentance and faith. We ought to be praying that the Lord would indeed revive our nation, our state, our community, our church, and even our own hearts. Revival begins in each one of us.

[Please note, the above was “free chicken” on Sunday morning. That means it was not part of my notes. However, having spoken it on Sunday, I am now including it in my transcript. Gotta love that free chicken!]

Ok, let's get into the text this morning.

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.

Verse 9a Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? . Are the Jews the only ones whose sins will not be counted against them? (v. 6-8)

Ancient Jewish literature said that God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell. So, it seems reasonable that a person might assume this **blessing** was limited to Jews.

This idea was a deeply held conviction of the Jewish people. So much so that they spilled over into the church among the first Christians, converts from Judaism. The church had to hold a special counsel in Jerusalem, captured in Acts 15, to discuss whether non-Jews must first be circumcised to be saved and concluded no.

After all, it was not Abraham's circumcision that warranted his righteousness. **Verse 9b For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.** So, if Abraham, the forefather of the Jews, was declared right by God by faith in Genesis 15 and was circumcised in Genesis 17, doesn't it make sense that it's not circumcision that makes one right with God? But rather faith?

This is Paul's point in **verse 10...How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised?** This is the existential question! How is one made right with God? Is it by religious ritual? Or is it by faith? Paul answered his own question – **it was not after but before he was circumcised.**

Recall from last week that Abraham was counted righteous by faith in Genesis 15. He was 75 in Genesis 12 and 86 in Genesis 16. Somewhere between 75 and 86 Abraham is counted righteous. The sign of circumcision did not come until Genesis 17, when Abraham was 99 years old, some 13 to 24 years after he was counted righteous by faith. For 13+ years he was a righteous uncircumcised gentile.

It's also important to note that Abraham's son, Ishmael, was circumcised but he was not included in the covenant with God. The promise came through Isaac, not Ishmael. So, the example of Abraham reveals two important truths: 1. righteousness came by faith long before the ritual and 2. you can do the ritual without being counted righteous.

Paul supplies two reasons Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised. The first is so that the religious act may not be confused with what it signifies, that the ritual would not be confused with the reality. **Verse 11a He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.**

Notice Paul uses both **sign** and **seal**. One commentator says we don't need to make a big deal about it, that the use of both words simply conveys that it was Abraham's faith that made him righteous. But I like MacArthur and Doriani's takes on this. They both identify a distinction between sign and seal. "A sign," MacArthur says, "points to something whereas a seal guarantees it."

Similarly, Doriani notes that "circumcision did not make Abraham righteous; it sealed the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised."

Simply put, circumcision, **the sign**, was **a seal** of authenticating proof that Abraham was counted righteous **by faith**. And if by faith, rather than by circumcision, then this righteousness by faith can be had by anyone who believes.

One might ask, "Well, if circumcision was the seal of righteousness, why don't we require circumcision now?" Because it was always God's intent to seal the hearts of men and women, not simply that they mark their bodies.

“And 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.” Deuteronomy 30:6

“Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts.” Jeremiah 4:4

If circumcision was a sign to seal right standing with God, what is the seal of our righteousness? Some might say baptism. Baptism is what we do to make our personal profession of faith public.

It’s an outward expression of an inward faith. It is a sign. It is something that points us to a reality that exists – namely that we have been declared righteous – but it does not affect the reality itself, it does not make us righteous.

Baptism is the sign of our salvation, but the Bible tells us that the seal of our righteousness is the Holy Spirit! *“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Ephesians 4:30*

Paul says we are sealed by the Holy Spirit as a guarantee, *“And who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.” 2 Corinthians 1:22*

And when are we sealed? When is our redemption guaranteed? Certainly not at baptism, but when we heard and believed the Gospel, *“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” Ephesians 1:13-14*

Abraham was declared righteous before circumcision so that the ritual would not be confused with the reality.

Let’s continue to the second purpose in **verses 11b-12, 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,¹² 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.**

Abraham is the **father of all who believe without being circumcised** – gentiles, who though physically uncircumcised, have circumcised hearts. These, Paul says in Romans 2:29, are the real Jews because, *“a Jew is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”*

Remember that Abraham was an uncircumcised gentile for over 13 years!

That is not to say that those who are Jews outwardly, circumcised physically, are exempt. The fact that Abraham was circumcised means he is also **the father of the circumcised.**

Paul is quite clear, however, that Abraham is not their father because they are circumcised...Abraham is **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.**

He is their father because they have faith, both the ritually circumcised and the uncircumcised, the Jew and the Gentile. But I want you to notice how Paul says this, he is the father **of those who walk in the footsteps of the faith.**

This is much more than mental assent. It is more than intellectually agreeing that something is true. It is being fully convinced that God is able to do what he promised. It’s the kind of belief that leads a man to lay everything on the line, trusting God to provide.

When you think of Abraham’s faith, you can’t help but think about him laying Isaac on the altar. To James’ point, this is the proof that Abraham really believed, that his faith was alive. The kind of faith Abraham had was the kind that caused him to walk.

Abraham walked out of Haran, his homeland, to a land unknown to him. The Lord said, “Start walking that way!” Abraham said, giddy up!

Abraham walked into harm’s way to save his nephew, Lot. Abraham, with his son Isaac following behind him, walked up the mountain one painful step at a time to the place where he would lay Isaac on the altar of sacrifice and raise his knife.

These are **the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised**. He walked these steps because he had faith. He took those steps because he believed. Not vice versa. He believed God and then from a place of right standing with God, he acted on that belief.

If the faith of Abraham was not tied to his circumcision and if circumcision was not required for him to be counted righteous, then that means there is nothing required to be counted righteous but faith.

Today we witnessed the beauty of baptism, one of the church’s two ordinances. We baptize because we are commanded by Jesus’ words and by His example.

We baptize people who have already been declared righteous by faith in Jesus. That’s why we ask them, with certainty, “have you placed your faith and trust in Jesus?” We know the answer because they have already done so. Baptism is a sign of something that has happened within them already. They have been declared righteous and they want to declare that to the world!

You also saw two men who had already been baptized as young men. They’ve since come to realize that what they did before was only ritual, without saving faith. Rituals don’t save, whether it’s circumcision or baptism. The sign will never confer what it is only meant to confirm.

Signs don’t save. What saves is **walking in the footsteps of faith that Abraham had before he was circumcised**. What saves is being fully convinced that God is able to do what He promised. It’s believing the Gospel.

And when you’re saved, when you’re declared righteous by faith, every sign is that much sweeter. Baptism of fellow believers reminds you that you were once dead in sin and you have been made alive with Christ. Their burial with Christ in baptism reminds you of your burial with Christ in baptism. Their being raised to walk in newness of life, reminds you of your own.

What a sweet Sunday that we get to observe not only baptism but also the Lord’s Supper, the other ordinance of the church. Both remind you that that you are not your own, you have been bought with a price, the blood of Jesus.

When you observe communion as a believer, what you are receiving is symbolic of the body and blood of Jesus. Packaged in any other container this is simply grape juice and a cracker.

But, when received by born-again believers in a spirit of worship, surrounded by their church family, the faithful who have laid down their own lives as Abraham laid down Isaac, it’s a whole lot more.

It’s communion with God and it’s communion with your church family. It’s community. It’s connection. It’s a sign of the blood of Christ poured out to make you clean. And it’s symbolic of the literal body of Christ broken so that you could be made whole and grafted into the figurative body of Christ, the Church.

Signs have their place! We celebrate both ordinances of the church together, both by the way have a connection to membership, which we also celebrated today, seventeen believers declaring “We are with you, Wildwood!” Baptized believers entering into committed relationship with the body of believers that calls themselves Wildwood Church.

Yes, signs have their place. They represent our faith, but they don’t replace it.

Heart-check time.

Have these rituals become old hat for you? Has your heart grown cold to them? Do you have trouble rejoicing over them today? Does seeing a dozen people be baptized and join the church and does sharing the Lord's Supper fail to bring you tears of joy and cause your soul to leap?

Why don't you submit that to the Lord today and ask Him to remind you what they represent and see if that doesn't revive your soul? Remember the Gospel you believe.

Perhaps you've come to realize that you, like those two men I described and countless others in my ministry, have relied on signs to save you?

Ask yourself "have rituals replaced faith?" If so, the answer is simple: believe the Gospel and be saved. Then let the ritual represent what it once replaced.

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