

Romans 4:9-12

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 0 0] Do be seated. Turn again to Romans 4. Romans 4, and let me just remind you there's a prayer meeting on Wednesday. So if you're able to, please join us on Zoom on Wednesday from 8 till 9 to gather to pray together.

So Romans is a book about God, isn't it? I hope you remember that. Over and over, Romans tells us about God, that God has a gospel, that God has good news.

Romans tells us that God is a son, and that God is righteous, and that God is just, and God is full of wrath. We've seen the nature and the character of God, and the attributes of God, what God is like. And one of the central issues that we've seen in Romans is this issue of righteousness.

Righteousness is what God is. That's who God is. God is righteous. He is in the right.

And the issue is, righteousness is what God requires. And the problem is, that righteousness is what you and I don't have. And so Paul spends a long time explaining this amazing plan of God, that God is righteous, God is demanding righteous, and yet what we don't have is righteousness.

[1 : 2 5] And yet God wonderfully has revealed his righteousness. The very thing that we need is the very thing God is willing to give. And he is willing to count men and women, boys and girls like you and I, as righteous.

And he's done that by sending his son, the Lord Jesus, to die in our place. And so there is this great exchange that happens, that my sin is counted as if it belonged to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he is crucified for my sin. And yet there's another more amazing part, that Christ's perfect righteousness is counted to me.

And so God's amazing plan all centers on, isn't it, the Lord Jesus Christ. And so it's through him that we have justification, that we're declared right with God.

It is through him that we have redemption, that we are brought back, we can go home to God. And it is through the Lord Jesus Christ that the wrath of God is diverted and taken away.

[2 : 3 1] Because Jesus Christ took the wrath of God upon himself. And so when he comes to chapter 4, he gives us this great example of Abraham. And he does it and he shows us that there's two ways of approaching God.

There's one way, do you remember it, the line of people, there's the line up for your paycheck approach. And that's what every single one of us does by default. That we think it's something that we've done or something that we do that puts God in our debt.

And God will one day reward us. It's the I've done my best line. It's the my good outweighs the bad line. And many of us have still got that in our thinking, haven't we?

Even when we come to Christ, we still drift over to that paycheck line. But the other line is a line of beggars. It's the gospel line.

It's the beggars approaching someone for mercy. Or it's the criminal lining up and saying, I've offended you and I've sinned against you.

[3 : 3 5] Please have mercy upon me. Or it's the orphan line saying, I have no father. I need the love and compassion of a father. And that's the good news line.

And that's the gospel line. And he opens it up in chapter 4. And he puts a human face on this line. And he says, here is Abraham. And that's a brilliant example.

Because Jews, they struggle to understand that they're the good news of the Lord Jesus. What do you mean they said we're in the wrong line? And Paul says, well look at Abraham, your forefather. He is the great example to follow. Because Abraham was rewarded by God for his faith. But on the other hand, the Gentiles, the people who hadn't grown up as Jews in that church in Rome, they'd not grown up with all that knowledge that the Jews had.

They didn't have the written Bible. They didn't have the teaching of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament. But Abraham was a brilliant example for them. Because Abraham was a total outsider who was brought inside.

[4 : 38] He was a pagan believer. He'd grown up surrounded by idols and worshipping idols. And God called this man out of nowhere to worship him.

And so both Jews and Gentiles, they say, Abraham, that's great. Look at him. Look at how God dealt with him. Which line was Abraham in? Was he in the paycheck line? Or was he in the begging for mercy line?

And verses 1 to 8 makes really clear that Abraham's works didn't count in the sight of God. It was Abraham's faith, Abraham trusting God, that counted in the sight of God.

And he gives us another example in verses 7 and 8. Can you see it? It's David. That David, the great king, he found that being accepted by God meant that he was blessed. He had a righteousness counted to him that meant his adultery, his murder, his lust could be forgiven. And his sins could be covered. And the Lord did not count his sin against him. And so being counted righteous in God's sight also means not having your sins counted against you.

[5 : 51] And that is astonishingly good news. Good news for every man and woman, boy and girl. What it means to be counted righteous. That the righteousness of Christ is counted as yours and your sin counted to the Lord Jesus.

So look with me at verse 9. Can you see it? Is this blessing then only for the circumcised? Or also for the uncircumcised?

For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he'd been circumcised? What came first? Well 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.

[6 : 56] Now all this talk about circumcision, a cutting away, a cutting away of the flesh.

He's talked about it before. Why is it important? What is going on that Paul has come back to this again and again? What's all this fuss?

Well let me answer it in three ways, okay? First question I want to ask. I want to ask, is this blessing only for the circumcised?

That's the question in verse 9. He's asking there, is this good news, is this gospel only for the Jewish people? Or even more specifically, is there only forgiveness of sins if you've been circumcised?

That's how he's asking the question. And the answer is really easy, isn't it, for you and I, having gone through Romans. But the answer isn't so easy for the people listening to the Apostle Paul.

[8 : 03] And to who Paul was writing. So look at how he's asking this question. He says, is this blessing then only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised? So the question you've got to ask is, what blessing? And it's the blessing of being counted righteous in God's sight.

The blessing of having your lawless deeds forgiven. The blessing of having your sin, the things that plague you, the skeletons in your cupboard. It's the blessing of them removed. And so is that only for people who are circumcised?

And it becomes a really crucial question. The Jews are listening to this letter. There's a live debate going on in the New Testament church.

They're standing around horrified that Paul could even ask this question. Because for the Jewish people, they would say, of course you have to be circumcised. Anyone who was a Gentile, who became a follower of God, they needed to be circumcised in order to be part of the church.

So if you know your Old Testament, to join the people of God in the Old Testament, that is what had to happen. So is this part of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Do you see what Paul does?

[9 : 17] He says, let's take the example of Abraham. For the Jews, he's the friend of God and the father of the faithful. And he simply asks this question, doesn't he? He asks the question, well, when was Abraham circumcised?

When did Abraham have this religious ritual? Was it before or was it after he was accepted by God? And the chronology is really clear.

It's about 14 years after he'd been counted as righteous that Abraham was circumcised. The Jews and the Jewish commentators, they kind of go for a different chronology.

They actually think it's about 29 years. I can't really see how they get that. After he'd been accepted by God. And so it seems really obvious to us, sitting here right now, when Paul asks this question, was Abraham circumcised before or after he'd been accepted by God?

You would think they would all be saying, well, of course it was after. 29 years after. But they didn't grasp what that meant. They've not worked out how devastating that is to their whole position.

[10:30] And their understanding of the place of circumcision. Abraham was circumcised at least 14 or 15 years after he was accepted by God. And by the Jewish counting 29 or 30 years after.

Paul could have asked a different kind of question. He could have asked this question, can you people not count? Or something like that. Can you not count? He's gentle with them.

And he asked this question, when was Abraham circumcised? Before or after he was accepted by God? And it was after. It was after. And of course it was after.

Because what Paul is establishing is that all the way through Romans, is that you and I can only be accepted by God because he is gracious. And because God shows mercy to us.

It is not in response to any work that we might have done. We are accepted because God is gracious. And not because of a religious ceremony.

[11:34] And here is where we have to start applying this to us. And look at the religious ceremonies. When we do that as they gain us acceptance with God.

And so let me stress this. That we understand what was going on. And we see how powerful the gospel is. I want to make two points to kind of demonstrate this. The Jews thought in this way.

They thought that circumcision was the mark of faithfulness to God. That's what they thought. And so the Jews placed great emphasis on it.

So one rabbi of Paul's day said of Abraham, he was not called perfect until he was circumcised.

And Paul is flatly contradicting that.

He says to be counted as righteous in God's sight can only be because of the righteousness of Jesus. That God views you in and through the righteousness of Jesus.

[12:36] So do you see Paul is completely contradicting the view of the Jews. And Paul objects to it. He says, well when was he counted righteous? It was years and years and years before he had the religious ritual.

The truth is this, isn't it? The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

And that's what Paul is saying. And the Jews just didn't get it. And so circumcision comes in as something to be added in order to make perfect your standing before God. But Paul says, no, no, the vilest offender who truly believes.

That moment from Jesus a pardon receives. Immediately, there's no waiting to see. Is he going to be circumcised? Is he going to be baptised? The moment you are pardoned, the moment you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's why it's important. He pulls the rug from under their feet. We are saved and brought under the saving grace of God before we do anything else when we believe.

[13:47] The second thing that I think really helps us is you think about the way the Jews talk about circumcision. So do you remember the story of David and Goliath? And Goliath is threatening his knee, the people of Israel.

And what did David call him, do you remember? David called him, he said, who is that uncircumcised Philistine? Who does he think he is? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine?

And it's mentioned like that because it described the keeping of the whole of the law in one little phrase. It's like shorthand. Circumcision was like a summary statement for the whole of the law.

And so think of what Paul says in Galatians. He says, if you're going to be circumcised, you've got to keep the whole law. Because not only did the Jews view circumcision as the big sign of faithfulness, but they also viewed it as the very first thing on the list that signified they were law keepers.

It was the big thing in this line that they had. The first thing that God ought to be impressed with, circumcised on the eighth day. Paul said that about himself, didn't he?

[15:08] He was the Pharisee of the Pharisees. I was the Jew of the Jews, he said. And the first thing that counted to me as a man of the Jews was I was circumcised on the eighth day. Philippians chapter four.

It's the first thing to which God ought to respond. And Paul is saying, no, no, no. Read the gospel according to Abraham. 14 years later. Abraham wasn't in the paycheck line.

Abraham was in the grace line. Is this blessing only for people who are circumcised? No, no. That is what he's saying. He's saying this blessing is for people who believe in Jesus.

That's the point. And so no religious ceremony is a work that impresses God. The gospel according to Abraham is the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

And we need to wrestle with that, don't we? And you and I need to fight that because why are we always trying to give God a reason to forgive us? Why is it so hard for us to accept the gift of his grace and his pardon and his mercy?

[16:27] Why do we find the pull of this line, the paycheck line, so powerful? And perhaps it's our pride. Perhaps it's our self-love. Perhaps it's our joy in things here and now and not in the free gift that he gives us in Jesus Christ.

The gospel is not only for Jews. The good news of God is for every helpless sinner this morning. So the second question is this.

Is circumcision meaningless? Was circumcision meaningless? That's not what he's saying. Look at verse 11. It says he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

So if you look at verse 11, just look at it there. He says it contains the message of the gospel. Do you remember the message of the gospel? It's a righteousness revealed. And it's spoken of, can you look at verse 11?

It's spoken of as a sign and as a seal. So the question is, what is a sign of and what is it a seal of? Is it how somebody was nationally identified?

[17:45] That's what often people say. It's not what circumcision was a sign and seal of. That's how you nationally identified. It's not according to Paul, is it?

Was it a sign that somebody descended from Abraham? Can you look there? No, it's not. So what is it a sign and seal of?

It's a sign and a seal of righteousness by faith. It's a sign and a seal of what the gospel is all about. And so you need to understand this really, really clearly that circumcision is not a mark of nationality. Circumcision was not a mark of political identity.

Circumcision was not a mark of ethnic identity. It was not a mark of family identity. It was none of those. It was not national, not political, not ethnic, not family. It was a sign and seal of what?

[18:48] The gospel. The good news. What does a sign do? A sign points to something else, doesn't it? It's not the thing itself.

It's not the act of circumcision. Circumcision was a pointer, pointing away from itself. And what does it point to? Let me give you six verses.

All right? Six verses. Deuteronomy 30 says this. Circumcise therefore the circumcision of your heart so you are no longer stubborn.

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 and that you may live.

That's what circumcision pointed to. Jeremiah 4 verse 4. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord.

Remove the foreskin of your hearts. Romans chapter 2.

[19:45] For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly nor is circumcision outward and physical but a Jew is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart by the spirit not by the letter.

His praise is from men but not from God. Philippians 3 Paul says for we are the circumcision who worship by the spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

Colossians 2.11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands by putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.

What's he saying? He's saying it's a sign and circumcision is a sign that we are all sinners and that we all need to be cleaned by Christ's work and that is exactly what Christ does.

Circumcision told you that there is a work that needs to be done in your heart that you can't do yourself and it's a seal. Sometimes a seal can imply ownership can't it?

[20 : 54] And you can think of circumcision in that way as implying ownership. Other times a seal is used to authenticate something so you get a letter from the President of the United States how do you know it's a real letter?

Well the President signed it. Yes but it's more than that isn't it? What do you get if you get a letter from the President of the US you get the President's seal on it? And when you get a sealed letter it's showing you that it is what it says it is and it's not a fake.

It's for real. Let's say you bought a Canada goose jacket from eBay. Let's just say that. And what do you look for?

You look for don't you the kind of authenticated badge or whatever it is because you wouldn't want to buy a fake on eBay would you?

You're looking for authenticity and that's what the seal is. And so what is it saying to you?

Circumcision was given as a seal of God's righteousness.

[22 : 01] It was meant to encourage you. It was meant to reassure you. It was meant to point you to believe in the message that it was telling you. And why was circumcision given?

It was given as a sign of righteousness by faith. Circumcision of the flesh pointed to the greater and deeper reality of circumcision of the heart.

It told the people of Israel there needs to be a work in you. Yeah you've been born into the people of God. Yeah your great great grandfather was Abraham or Isaac. Yes yes yes but actually you need your heart to be circumcised.

And it points to this fact that Abraham believed God and it was given to him as this sign. And this sign is a gospel witness. It is a gospel witness to a gospel centred life.

And he receives it after he believed it. He received the sign after he believed and then God says to him go and put the sign on your children. Eight days old.

[23 : 11] Obviously before they believed. And so it's not a sign of national identity. It's not a sign that they are descended from Abraham. It is a sign and a seal of righteousness by faith.

And it was given to him after. It didn't contribute to standing before God. And then it's given as a command to be given to his children. Obviously before they believe.

Why? Because it's a gospel sign. And it points his children to believe in the promise of the Lord Jesus. And that is what God commanded.

It was commanded to be placed upon the children. And so circumcision is not meaningless at all. Circumcision is a gracious gospel sign and it is part of Abraham's rejoicing in the gospel and the nature of the gospel itself.

And it was put on the descendants as a testimony, as a sign and a seal of the gospel itself. Now I could run on into infant baptism, but I'm not going to.

[24 : 21] I'm not going to do that. I'm just going to leave that powerful implication of that truth to ruminate in your mind. I'm not going to go to infant baptism, but I could if I wanted.

All right? Sign is not at work. That's the third thing. What's the purpose of this sign? Circumcision didn't contribute to him being accepted by God.

But it pointed to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and it pointed to the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. So look with me at verse 11. What's the purpose? What's the purpose?

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 had before he was circumcised.

What this does is it created a missionary. It gives him a mission. And the mission it gives him is the mission of God.

[25 : 43] It was because of God's mission that he was calling people from all the families of the earth to himself. This sign was given. It's a missionary doctrine.

Abraham was justified, declared righteous by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. He was circumcised after he had believed.

It's a missionary doctrine. And he extends that missionary doctrine to his children but also as we hear the spiritual significance of that circumcision that it was always pointing the circumcision of the heart and it was pointing us forward than it applies to everyone.

And so Romans 4 says to you, you don't have to be brought up in a particular culture. And you don't have to be brought up in a particular place or at a particular time or in a particular language group or

from a particular country.

you are simply called to believe in Jesus Christ. And it is a missionary doctrine. And you can't sit still with it. You can't keep it in that to know God and to enjoy God and to delight in God, that is what it pointed to.

[27 : 05] That Abraham is the father of all who believe without being circumcised. And so we thank God for the gospel for every one of us who truly believes.

Now just note with me the stress and the ESV misses this a little bit. It doesn't help us. Look at the end of verse 10. It should read while still uncircumcised.

And at the end of verse 11 or the middle of verse 11, while he was still uncircumcised. And at the end of verse 12, while still uncircumcised.

It's like Paul's deliberately emphasising one thing. That Abraham was credited as righteous, counted as righteous in God's sight while uncircumcised.

And Paul wants to say to you again and again and again and again, it is believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And it is don't hold back. And don't hesitate.

[28 : 06] The fact that you've not been circumcised cannot prevent you from being saved. God is calling you and he calls you now. That it was while Abraham was still uncircumcised that God made his covenant with him and he stands ready to do the same for you.

I like that. This then is a call to Christians to live the gospel and to spread the gospel. and it's a call to you who are not Christians this morning to hurry up.

To hurry up and believe in Christ because there is nothing that ought to hold you back. And he is saying to you this morning come on it doesn't matter where you grew up.

It doesn't matter what accent you speak with. It doesn't matter what qualifications you've got. It doesn't matter what your cultural background it is. Come on come to the Savior. the Savior of all who come to him.

Circumcised or uncircumcised. Let's pray together.