

Justification Signed and Sealed

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Bible Text: Romans 4:9-12

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OPENING PRAYER:

Our gracious God and heavenly Father, we praise you for the privilege of worshiping you today, for the joy of fellowship with your people and for the honor of being in your presence as you speak your word to us. We pray you would lift our spirits by its truth and power. We pray you would work upon us as a potter would work upon clay. And that as our minds are informed and renewed by the truth of the gospel, our hearts may be set aflame with love for our Lord Jesus Christ. Our wills bowed down in worship and adoration. And our whole lives recalibrated by being in his presence and having his word, which is truth, sanctify us and make us more and more like him. So, Lord, speak for your servants are eager and we are listening. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING:

Now our reading this evening as we continue our studies in Paul's letter to the Romans is from Romans 4:9-12. You'll find that the passage is in the pew Bible if you want to use the Bible that's in the rack in front of you, on page 941.

Paul has been speaking here about Abraham and, of course, Abraham is the forefather of the Jews. And, indeed, the father of the Jews to whom he's speaking and the one in whose life God first of all introduced circumcision. And Paul's whole argument, of course, has been that no one is justified by works of the law. Nobody is justified either, as we shall see, by circumcision. He has been speaking about the blessing of justification, forgiveness and pardon and he asks this question in verse 9,

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 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.

SERMON:

Romans, of course, is Paul's great magisterial letter and, I suppose, partly because it's so often been associated with great Christian doctrine, we sometimes forget that, actually, it's part of a much larger narrative: the narrative of Paul's own life. We get little glimpses of that at the beginning in Romans 1 and then towards the end. And we understand that everything he's saying here not only fits into his present ministry as he's hoping to visit Rome and then go on to Spain, but the teaching he gives fits into his whole life, his experience, and everything that he has been taught by the Lord. We all recognize that the Apostle Paul's life divided rather obviously into two halves: there was the half that preceded his experience on the Damascus Road, there was the half that followed his experience on the Damascus Road. There was that moment in time, but also as we read about him, especially in the Acts of the Apostles, we understand that while he was bowed down in the dust on the road to Damascus and inquired of Jesus as Lord, the Lord Jesus had already been working in his life.

The Apostle Paul, before he was converted to Christ, had been the leading young man of his generation in terms of zeal for the law, in terms of orthodoxy, in terms of being a Pharisee, even, he says, in terms of persecuting this church that claimed Jesus was the Messiah. It seems to me, as I've said before, almost certain that the Apostle Paul was an acquaintance, at least, with Stephen, the martyr. They may very well have belonged to the same synagogue, certainly, it was from the synagogue to which Saul of Tarsus probably belonged, that the hottest opposition to Stephen was brought forward.

And so, the Apostle Paul in his earlier day, was accustomed to arguing against Christians. And we're given this delightful little footnote about Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles, that there wasn't a single Jew in his generation that was able to contend with him as they sought to argue down his exposition and defense of the Christian gospel. And it's speculative, I admit, but I feel fairly sure that that was one of the things that stimulated the Apostle Paul to silence this man Stephen and to silence the church to which he belonged.

And then he was gloriously converted. And it's clear from his writings that as he meditated on what had happened to him, how he had discovered on the Damascus Road that Jesus really was the Messiah; and, how he probably realized in the same almost overpowering moment, therefore, Stephen whom we martyred was right. It was also in those hours, you remember, that the Lord sent him a messenger to say to him, "And Saul, I am going to send you to the Gentiles." So, three staggering, staggering conclusions for a

zealous, anti-Christian Jew to reach. That Jesus was the Messiah, that the martyr Stephen had been right and that the gospel was not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles.

And so, it shouldn't at all surprise us that when Paul himself begins his preaching and discovers as he preaches in the synagogues that there is opposition to his message and there are questions being asked, that he realizes now he's on the other side. He's actually become a disciple of Stephen who was a disciple of the Lord Jesus. And he has learned over the years how to study the Scriptures and how to respond to these objections and questions that have come to him from Jewish people to whom he's been preaching Jesus as the Messiah. And he knows his Scriptures so well that he's able almost at his fingertips to expound biblical answers to Jewish questions.

But, of course, he's reached the point in the letter where almost as a last defense for the moment, as he said, justification is not by keeping the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. Not by works but by grace. He knows what he used to say, "What about Abraham, our forefather? What did he do? He is the one who offered his son, Isaac, on the altar. Was he not, therefore, justified?" Not by this new way that Stephen had been preaching but justified on the basis of his works. At the beginning of chapter 4, he had, I'm sure with a little smile, said, "Well, let's just turn back a few pages here in our scrolls and read the story of Abraham." And we discover in Genesis 15:6 as clear as crystal, "Abraham believed God and that was counted to him as righteousness."

But then he's come to a place here when he hears somebody saying the very thing that he, himself, probably said, You are destroying our religion. You are destroying the privileges that we have had of circumcision. You are saying, Paul, that circumcision doesn't matter. Circumcision doesn't matter. And so you are overthrowing the religion of Abraham who received circumcision and of all Abraham's descendants, our own people. So he says again, Well, let's look at Abraham. And he brings them back to the Scriptures and he says, Let's do some little Bible study here. They don't realize they're playing into his hands because he knows his Old Testament so well.

Having spoken about Abraham who was circumcised receiving forgiveness and David who was also circumcised receiving forgiveness, he says to those who say, But surely circumcision is the thing that really makes a difference with God, he says, Well, let's look again at Abraham. Then he says, you'll notice I think and you would have been able to predict from what I said this morning, he says three things about Abraham in this context.

And the first is this, you'll see it in verses 9 and 10, that Abraham received righteousness apart from circumcision. The question is: is this blessing only for the circumcised? We have already said that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Or we might say just kind of tweaking the question: when then, because

that's really the issue the apostle is focusing in on. When was Abraham accounted by God to be righteous?

Now, of course, they didn't have our Bible verses but if they'd had our Bible verses, he would have said, every single Jew here knows Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now then, he said, "when was Abraham circumcised?" And the answer to that question is: sometime later. Some significant time later. To be precise: the time that's recorded in Genesis 17:9. Paul is really saying, The conclusion is as clear as it could possibly be made to you. Don't you see what the Scriptures are saying? That Abraham was justified by faith long before he was circumcised. That as a matter of fact, Abraham was justified as an uncircumcised man. And in that sense for you to say, Oh, but it's the circumcised that God justifies, is to fly in the face of the very original circumcision and the very original example of a man who was circumcised. This man," says the apostle, was circumcised ages after he was justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

Of course, he's making the simple point or at least we can apply it in this way, that justification comes, therefore, neither by our ability to do good works nor by our observation of the sacraments. And he's put this principle in a most brilliant way that simply makes the arguments that there were against his teaching of the gospel, collapse like a house of cards. It wasn't anything that Abraham did after God had closed his covenant with him that brought him justification. It was simply the way in which he trusted the promise of God that ultimately God would send his Son as the seed of Abraham to be the Savior who would also be Abraham's Savior.

Now, you know there's an application of that to ourselves that's a very elementary teaching that the Apostle Paul is giving. It's a teaching about the way into salvation. But, you see, the general point that Paul is making here is this: nothing, absolutely nothing that Abraham did after that moment he trusted in the Lord, nothing that he did was placed in the foundation on which he was justified by grace.

John Owen, the great Puritan writer, has a saying that applies to this and he understood this very well from the large number of Christians he had counseled. He said, "One of the most important things in the world for a Christian believer is not to try to build into the grounds of his or her acceptance with God anything that believer does after they have become Christians." Now, that's a very obvious point, isn't it? If we are justified exclusively by grace on the grounds of what Jesus Christ has done for us and that becomes ours the moment we trust in Jesus Christ, we can't then back-up what we do in the future and build that into the foundation of our acceptance before God and say, "Now, the reason I'm accepted before God is because..." And yet we do. Or perhaps to put it a little negatively: what we so often do is to think that our acceptance with God is actually

at the end of the day, based on something in us, that we are a little more acceptable to God than that other Christian is acceptable to God. Or negatively, that we are less acceptable to God than that other Christian is.

And this basic point that nothing that happens to Abraham after he is justified by faith in God's promise can add to God's justification is actually such an important point for us to understand. You can't add to your justification. You can never be more justified than you were justified the moment you became a Christian. Why do I say that? Because the only way – and you have heard me say this in one form or another before and I'll say it in 100 other forms again – you can never be justified by any other justification than the righteousness of Jesus Christ. And to that righteousness you and I can add nothing. Absolutely nothing.

You see, that's what gives us joy and assurance. So long as in my Christian life I am thinking, "If I can just add a little more into the foundation of my justification so I can be sure of my justification and salvation," you see, I've mixed something false into the foundation. That's what I do. I'm polluting the milk of the gospel as they were doing in China, weren't they? And you see, we all do that so often because actually the truth of the matter is, by nature the most difficult thing for any sinner to believe is that he or she can be justified exclusively on the grounds of God's saving goodness and mercy and on no other grounds whatsoever. And most of us spend an amazing amount of wasted energy in our Christian lives trying to get something into the foundation there that will make us feel more secure. More secure than God's promise? More secure than God's Son? More secure than his bloody sacrifice on the cross? And yet in the face of all that, I find myself doing it.

Ah, but, you say, if that was the gospel...if that was the gospel, that I can't add to my justification, if people believed that they would live any way they wanted. Now that's the clearest proof this is the gospel because that's the very objection the Apostle Paul was constantly facing, You tell people they can be justified by doing absolutely nothing but trusting in Jesus Christ and that many years of faithful Christian living can add nothing to that justification? My dear friends, if you don't believe that, it's not the gospel of Jesus Christ you've come to believe, it's actually Roman Catholicism you've come to believe. It's some kind of self- help. Heaven helps those who help themselves. I put some energy into this because my own soul needs to hear this day in and day out. And if your soul doesn't need to hear this day in and day out, my dear friend, you haven't begun to discover your own soul.

So, there is a glorious preaching of the gospel to those who already believe it here. If you come to the Lord's table tonight and have the sweetest communion possible with the Lord Jesus Christ, you will not be one whit more justified than you are this evening. Isn't that

glorious? Isn't that something? Isn't that something that can set you free from all the bondage that binds you in your relationship to God? So often, you know, Christians are thinking, He loves me. He loves me not. He loves me. He loves me not. And he placards the cross before us and says to us, What more can I do to persuade you that in Jesus Christ you are finally fully absolutely accepted? When that dawns on me, the liberty and the energy it begins to give to living the Christian life is so wonderful.

So, righteousness, he's saying, is received apart from circumcision but secondly and you'll notice this in the first half of verse 11, is Paul is saying that circumcision then has no value. "No," he says, righteousness has as its sign and seal, the gift of circumcision. Do you see the mistake we were making? They were mistaking the engagement ring for the fiancée. That's what they were doing. Oh, we're circumcised, they said. Yes, said Paul, but you're not seeing what circumcision means. I mean in a sense, it's almost laughable. It's almost as though they were staring at their circumcision instead of staring at what their circumcision meant. And he explains to them what circumcision meant: it was never given to provide the basis or foundation for justification. It was given, says Paul, as a sign and seal of the gift of God's saving righteousness.

He puts it this way, you'll notice in verse 11a, in the first half, he says, "Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." See the way he just keeps on insisting there? Now, remember he was uncircumcised at this point. So the circumcision doesn't lie in the foundation of his salvation, it's a sign and a seal of the saving righteousness that God gave him and which he received through faith. He was justified apart from circumcision, justified by grace, justified by faith, and God added to the promise of his justification. A sign and a seal of that righteousness in the mark of circumcision on his own body.

Now several questions: How did Paul know this? How did Paul know that God gave circumcision as a sign and seal? Answer: because Paul read his Bible. That's how he knew. He isn't making this up. This isn't something that's coming to him, as it were, some special revelation from God as though nobody ever knew this and the Apostle Paul was the first person ever to reveal this. No, actually this had been said right from the very beginning, Genesis 17:11. Circumcision was the sign of this covenant of saving grace that God was making with Abraham. It was there in the Scriptures in Genesis 17:11 and it was a sign that functioned as a seal. Now, what does a seal do? A seal confirms something. You know in the old days when people used to seal their letters. Those seals were a confirmation that this letter had come from the author; that this was the real thing. As we know right through Scripture, whenever God entered into a saving covenant relationship with his people at any period, he always added to the word of salvation he spoke a sign of that salvation. And the sign of that salvation always functioned to confirm to the believer as he looked at that sign, a visible expression of the truth. God didn't need to do that. God

didn't add anything to their salvation by doing that. But that sign, whether it was in the days of Noah, the sign and seal of the rainbow, or in the days of Abraham here, the sign and seal of circumcision, or in the days of Moses, the sign and seal of the Sabbath day, or in the days of our Lord Jesus Christ, the sign and seal of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Whenever God entered savingly into covenant with his people, God always added a sign.

You would think it very strange to come to a wedding in this church or to go through the normal service and for there to be no rings, wouldn't you? Some of you might even think that if there were no rings, they weren't properly married. But you can be properly married without any rings, can't you? I hope so. Does the ring add to the marriage? Does it make it more legal? Does it make it more lasting? No, it doesn't. What does it do? It's a sign that acts as a seal between the couple. The man may love the woman with all his heart, promise to be with her so long as they both shall live. You don't need any sign of that. You don't need any seal of that. Is his word not enough for you? Ah, but when you've got the sign and the seal, you just need to find a woman who has lost her wedding ring to see that or her engagement ring. Why is she in a tizzy? Is it just the money? No, it's the sign and seal. It's the sign and seal.

You see, God understands how we tick. You know, you sometimes meet Christian people who say such foolish things like, You know, I don't really need the sacraments. You foolish, foolish, foolish, unbiblical Christian to say something like that. God has given us the sacraments. God came to Abraham. Now it seems strange to us, seems excruciating to us the arrangement God made but it sure was a lasting sign, wasn't it? For every Jewish male, for every male of the line of Abraham and clearly there is a reason. If we had time to go into it, I'd go into it, why it is that only the men received the sign. It was because the fullness of time hadn't come; God hadn't finished his purposes. He was just beginning his purposes.

But, says Paul, the sign was given to him as a seal of the righteousness which God gave to him as he came to trust in him and then amazingly – now this is such an important point for us to grasp because it helps us understand all of the sacraments of the Bible so much better – that sign and seal was not only given to Abraham, it was to be given to his eight day old progeny in perpetuity and – now here's the point to grasp – when it was given to an eight day old boy, it meant exactly the same thing as it meant when it was given to old father Abraham. Why is that so important? It's important for this reason: that the sacraments of God's covenants are never, ever, ever, ever in the first instance signs of my faith. They are always signs and seals of God's grace.

Paul says that here quite explicitly. He doesn't say it was a sign and seal of the faith that Abraham had. If it was a sign and seal of the faith Abraham had, it would be kind of difficult to see how in this widespread way Abraham was told, "Make sure the eight day

old boys are circumcised.” No, it was a sign that didn’t point to Abraham. That’s the whole point of it. It pointed away from Abraham to Abraham’s God, to Abraham’s God’s willingness to justify those who believe, to Abraham’s God’s provision of righteousness in the seed he’d promised to Abraham.

And as you read through the Scriptures, you discover every single sacrament like that. Think of the rainbow with Noah: is the rainbow a sign to Noah that Noah is a believer? No, the rainbow is a sign to Noah that God is going to keep his covenant promise. And it, therefore, draws faith out of Noah. Whenever he sees the rainbow, he wants to stand and cheer and say, God, you’re remembering your promise to me. And every time a male child looked at the sign of circumcision, he was meant to see beyond the circumcision to this great promise that God had given that he would provide righteousness to all who believed as father Abraham had believed.

Now, you can sit down and work this out with each of the covenant signs that you find in the Bible and if you do, you’ll notice that they all function in this way. Every single one of them. The direction in which they point us is not first to our response to the gospel but first to the gospel to which we respond. You know, when you grasp that, this is a guarantee, you can come and tell me if this guarantee fails but from this pulpit, I guarantee you on my word of honor that if you come, for example, to the Lord’s Supper and stop looking at yourself and start looking at Jesus Christ in whom alone is all your righteousness to be found, you’ll find far more interesting things to think about in the Lord’s Supper than you have ever done at any point in your life. And the moment you begin to see that baptism is first and foremost a sign of what Jesus Christ has done for you — his baptism — that draws from your admiration, trust, faith, obedience, then I tell you something: you’ll be able to use as the Bible expects you to use, you’ll be able to use your baptism for the rest of your life. For the rest of your life. And it will be a most glorious means of understanding the grace of God in the gospel. You know, so long as you think what happened to you at baptism was that it was a sign of your faith, then that’s all you’re left with. Your baptism is no good to you when your faith is struggling. If I can put it this way: it won’t hold any water under such circumstances, will it? Because if all it says is, “I was baptized and it was a sign that I had believed,” what about when I’m struggling with faith? All I can do is look back to my baptism and say, “Oh, it was a sign I did believe but I’m struggling now and it’s no use to me now.” But, you see, when you see that as, for example, Martin Luther did, you look upon the fact that God has given you a sign of his saving grace, the washing of the blood of Jesus Christ to make you clean, then, it really is a sign of the gospel. It works exactly the same way the gospel works. The gospel doesn’t say to you, Turn in upon yourself. The gospel says, Look to Jesus Christ. Flee to Jesus Christ. Fix your eyes upon Jesus Christ and not on yourself because faith in its very nature isn’t looking to self, it’s looking to Jesus Christ. And when we grasp what Paul was teaching that Abraham had grasped here about all of those

signs, then all of those signs get filled up with the glory and strength and power of the gospel. And we begin to understand that God didn't give them to us so that we could look at ourselves but so that we could look at him and find his grace and his majesty and his glory in Jesus Christ.

Now sadly, we read in the Old Testament that they didn't and they looked to themselves. And interestingly in the Old Testament, in the Old Testament it says that the circumcised became uncircumcised. As though we could say the baptized can be unbaptized. Instead of drawing upon the gospel of which their baptism is a sign and the glorious seal, they turn away from that gospel. And my dear friends, I don't care a hoot how you were baptized, if you turn away from the gospel, your baptism becomes unbaptism. And it can never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever save you. You are meant to look to your baptism in order that your baptism like a mirror may cause you to reflect on Jesus Christ. Who Jesus Christ is and what Jesus Christ has come into the world to do and then that draws faith. And then it really means something to say with Martin Luther – I meant to tell you five minutes ago what Martin Luther said – “I am a baptized man.” Can you say that? I don't mean you've had water somewhere but your whole being is taken up with what that baptism means, that it points you to the awful blood baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ which, incidentally, was his awful blood circumcision on the cross of Calvary. And through these signs and seals, like a young girl in love who fingers her engagement ring, her marriage is doomed if she's thinking about how much it cost. But it's got great hope if she's thinking about how much he paid because he loves her so much. You see? That's what Paul is saying. They made the tragedy of looking at the sign instead of looking at the Lord.

And that's why he ends — this — just a marvelous statement in the last two verses: righteousness is received apart from circumcision, righteousness has its sign and seal in circumcision, and then finally, righteousness is granted with or without circumcision. Righteousness is granted with or without circumcision. And he holds up Abraham again. And it's as though Paul really must have loved the Scriptures. He holds up Abraham and he says, Now, let's think about Abraham. Oh, Abraham was justified as an uncircumcised man so that those who look to the same saving God as Abraham looked when he was an uncircumcised man could say with Abraham, God justifies the uncircumcised. And so that those who were the natural children of Abraham could also look back to Abraham and say, and God justifies the circumcised who share Abraham's faith.

Now, one of the genius bits of this is, later on in this letter, he's going to come on, much later on, we're a year down the way, much later on he's going to come to a little difficulty in the church in Rome. And it really does look as though that difficulty in the church at Rome is a difficulty between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. He does this all through Romans, long before he gets there he's nailed it. Because you see what he's

saying...he's saying to these Christians in Rome, just imagine them if they were in the one little congregation in somebody's front room, mixed Jews and Gentiles. You see what he's saying is, put your arms around one another's necks and embrace one another because whether you're circumcised or uncircumcised, if you're trusting in Jesus Christ you share exactly the same salvation and you share exactly the same father in the faith — Father Abraham. Abraham is my father, says the Jew. And the Gentile stands up at the other side of the front room and says, And he's my father, too. Another Jew stands up and says, He's my father. Another Gentile stands up and a 21st century Christian wanders into this 1st century church and says, What's going on here? And what's going on here is that they've discovered how the gospel of Jesus Christ does what no power on earth can do. It breaks down the barriers between Jew and Gentile in Jesus Christ. Every single barrier broken down.

I had a very, very, very unexpected experience at the end of the second service this morning. For those of you who were in the first service, I mentioned a sermon that had been preached by a very famous 18th century American minister, "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry." And two people on the way out said, "We're related to that man." If you shake my hand at the door tonight before you say anything else, this will be the sign to me that you really believe, you just say the words, this will be fun, "Abraham is my father. Abraham is my father."

Isn't that an amazing gospel? And aren't these signs that he's given to us? Think about this, beloved, next week, when we come to the Lord's table instead of looking to yourself. There's no hope for you there. There's no progress there. No resources there. You see the broken bread and the poured out wine and they point you to the Savior's dying love for you and there's every hope there.

I'm reminded of the way in which C. H. Spurgeon was converted. One winter's night, you know, he went to church and hardly anybody there. And the man in the pulpit wasn't much good and he was struggling with his sermon and he pointed at little Spurgeon who was a teenager, who became the greatest preacher in England, in the world probably, "Young man," he said, "you're looking miserable. Look to Jesus. Look to Jesus. Look to Jesus." And because he couldn't think of anything else to say, he said, "And look to Jesus." Well, beloved, look to Jesus and live and be a man or a woman who can say, Abraham was my father. May God help us.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for the word that comes to us so full of grace and seems to know us through-and-through. Helps us to look to Jesus. Help us to help one another to do that and help us to thrill both in the power of your word and in the glorious freedom

you give us because we are beginning to learn that we can't add to our justification. Oh yes, Father, we've a long way to go in loving you and serving you and knowing you and of fellowship with you but we thank you that we are as justified through faith in Jesus Christ as we shall ever be in all eternity. And we pray that that will empower us to live for your glory. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.