

Sermons through

# Romans

## The Sign, A Seal

*Romans 4:9-12*

*With Study Questions*

*Pastor Paul Viggiano  
Branch of Hope Church  
2370 W. Carson Street, #100  
Torrance, CA 90501  
(310) 212-6999  
pastorpaul@integrity.com  
[www.branchofhope.org](http://www.branchofhope.org)  
3/10/2013*

# The Sign, A Seal

*Romans 4:9-12*

Does this blessedness then *come* upon the circumcised *only*, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. <sup>10</sup> How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. <sup>11</sup> And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which *he had while still* uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, <sup>12</sup> and the father of circumcision to those who not only *are* of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham *had while still* uncircumcised (Romans 4:9-12).

## Introduction

Polycarp was a second century bishop of the Christian church in Smyrna. He was famous for his martyrdom – burned at the stake, then stabbed when the fire failed, for some reason, to touch him. Afterward his bones were gathered for relics which, they thought, could work miracles. This was not a terribly uncommon practice, in fact the word ‘relic’ means remains and was primarily applied to the saints of old. It was believed that the body parts of a martyr (skulls, teeth, bones, femur, fingers) would have healing value. John Calvin said:

**Hence we may infer, that the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols. <sup>1</sup>**

Or, said another way:

**The human heart is a factory of idols... Every one of us is, from his mother’s womb, expert in inventing idols.**

---

<sup>1</sup> Calvin, J. (1997). *Institutes of the Christian religion*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

Fascination or taking some sort of refuge in relics, whether in the original sense or in some other idolatrous sense, is not an uncommon practice. Whether it is the shroud of Turin, searching for Noah's ark, parts of the cross, portions of ancient biblical manuscripts, or other significant artifacts, man seeks to fill an insatiable appetite in his own soul – a soul plagued by ignorance and emptiness. Man is incurable idolatrous. Even the bronze serpent God appointed Moses to make to heal those bitten by serpents became an object of worship (2 Kings 18:4).

I am sure most of us are quite confident that we are above such primitive idolatrous proclivities, but it is just here that I find myself quite concerned – that we are not alert to those idols seeking to find the cracks in the cement of our souls, especially when they can be so close – even found in God ordained religious institutions! Circumcision was not man's idea.

**This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you (Genesis 17:10, 11).**

But this God ordained sacrament had become a source of division and controversy in the church. The sacrament, which carried with it the testimony of our corruption, had become a work whereby which men thought they had merited approval before God. Like vestments which were designed to hide the preacher becoming garments of prestige, the sacraments were transformed into badges for pious men rather than a message from a holy God.

Certainly there may be a sense where the sacraments are a public testimony of man's faith, but over and above that they are a testimony of God's mercy and or our own corruption. In the Lord's Supper there is a call remember that it is through the shed blood of Christ that we have remission of sin. Our testimony, therefore, is that we are sinners in need of faith which God graciously provides. Baptism carries with it a sign of cleansing. Our testimony, therefore, is that we need to be cleansed. Circumcision carried the same message as baptism. Ironic that instead of circumcision continually reminding the Israelite of their need for the shed blood of the Messiah, it became a symbol of merit and prestige where those

who had it set themselves above others who did not. With this in mind we observe the passage which is not overly complicated:

**Does this blessedness then *come upon the circumcised only*, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness (Romans 4:9).**

### **Faith Accounted for Righteousness**

The blessedness of which Paul writes is the blessedness found in the prior verse – **“Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin” (Romans 4:8)**. It is the glorious transfer of our sin to Christ and His righteousness to us. Paul had already made the point (Romans 4:3) which he repeats here that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to sinners by faith – Abraham **“believed the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6)**.

But then a question arises – certainly Abraham is counted righteous by faith, but is it faith alone? Was it not necessary that Abraham be circumcised? Was not circumcision (or in our case, its New Testament anti-type, baptism) necessary to complete his salvation – to grant him the full righteousness necessary to stand acquitted before a holy God? Hence the question and its answer:

**How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised (Romans 4:10).**

### **Righteous Before the Sign**

It was when God took Abraham for a walk, showed him the stars and made a promise that Abraham believed and the righteousness of Christ was imputed to him (Genesis 15:5, 6). Sometimes we don't think of the Old Testament this way, but Abraham was evangelized:

**And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to**

**Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed (Galatians 3:8).**

It is two chapters, and many years, later<sup>2</sup> that God institutes the sign of circumcision. Paul's point is clear. Abraham was accounted righteous before any religious symbol was put upon him.

One danger here, a very prominent danger in our current culture, is to make the false assumption that these signs are either dispensable or of little importance – something Moses learned to be quite untrue when the Lord "**sought to kill him**" due to his failure to put the sign of the covenant on his son (Exodus 4:24-26).

So, it would appear, one danger is making the signs unimportant, the other is making them too important – or, perhaps more accurately, assigning undue power to the sacrament itself thus entering into a *ex opere operato* "by the work worked" discussion. Suffice it to say for now that when God institutes a sacrament it is extremely critical that His church honor that institution. Let us also realize that to partake in that sacrament apart from faith in that to which sacrament points (and faith in that alone) transforms the event into a source of judgment. Abraham certainly did not neglect the sign:

**And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which *he had while still* uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also,<sup>12</sup> and the father of circumcision to those who not only *are* of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham *had while still* uncircumcised (Romans 4:11-12).**

## **The Sign**

Abraham received the sign (*semeion*) of circumcision, as we should receive the sign of baptism. The nature of a sign is that it is not itself the thing or the destination, but it is that by which something is pointed to or known. A sign tells us where to go, where to look or what something is.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ishmael was born when Abram was eighty-six and the sign of circumcision was presented to Abram at age ninety-nine (Genesis 16:15; 17:1).

When Judas kissed Jesus it was a “**sign**” telling the soldiers who to seize (Matthew 26:48). What we often translate as “**miracles**” the Bible calls “**signs**” or “**powers**” (*semeion* or *dunamis*). Signs, in particular, pointed to the authenticity of the one performing the sign, that their message was legitimate or “**confirmed**” (Mark 16:20).

Circumcision was a sign which pointed to a great many things: inclusion among God’s people, the sin of man, the need for cleansing – but above all these things we are told that the power of God is the active agent in accomplishing all of these things:

**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).**

Like baptism, over and above it pointing to man’s testimony, it is God’s testimony of what God will do or has done. When it comes to justification it can’t be overly stated that man is justified by what God alone does through the cross of Christ. We often utilize the example of the criminal crucified next to Jesus as an argument against the need to be baptized to be saved, and it does certainly provide a good example. But let us also recognize that if we were to take all our good works in a lifetime of faithful service before God and placed those things on a conveyer belt to heaven, we would no greater claim on the pardon of God than that criminal had in those few hours of faith.

Had that criminal been given the opportunity to be baptized – it would have served, more than all things, as a demonstration of his own corruption (to which he, no doubt, would have given a hearty ‘amen’) and God’s mercy; and these without any accidental spilling of human works into the message of the sacrament.

## **Seal**

Paul uses another word, “**seal**” (*sphragida*). A seal was an instrument for stamping – often with a scepter or ring pressed onto melted wax. It indicates proof that something is genuine. Paul viewed the believers at Corinth as a “**seal**” of his genuine office of apostle (1 Corinthians 9:2). The

seal also carried with it the idea of security and destination – the way we might think of a certified letter and the assurance we are given that it has reached its destination.

Circumcision, and its New Testament anti-type, baptism is a **“seal of the righteousness of the faith”** that we had while still yet un-baptized. It’s as if God, in His recognition of our weakness, puts His stamp upon us that we might be more fully assured that we are His – that we have been found – that His name is upon us. We recently went to Disneyland and wrote our phone number on our six-year-olds arm. Sure enough, we at a certain point in the day became separated, but our little guy had the comfort of knowing (even though he had memorized the number) that our mark was upon him. Within minutes our phone rang and we were united.

But let it be known that the sacrament is only valuable to the extent that it points away from itself and to the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ. Cannot the same be said regarding any religious activity including the church itself? In light of these things, the words of Calvin of a value:

**And though they are dead and unprofitable symbols to the reprobate, they yet ever retain their import and character (*vim suam et naturam*:) for though our unbelief may deprive them of their effect, yet it cannot weaken or extinguish the truth of God. Hence it remains a fixed principle, that sacred symbols are testimonies, by which God seals his grace on our hearts.<sup>3</sup>**

### **A Sign of Faith on Infants?**

It might also be worthwhile to address at least one common objection to infant baptism. Circumcision was a **“sign and seal of the righteousness of faith”** that Abraham had while yet uncircumcised. The objection of made against infant baptism (one I have myself made) is that it seems wrongheaded to put a sign of faith on one who has made no profession of faith. And yet God commanded that the sign of faith be put on, not only Abraham, but every male child at eight days (Genesis 17:12). If the Bible be our guide, it cannot, in principle, be wrong to put the sign of faith on those

---

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin’s Commentaries (Ro 4:11). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

who have made no profession of faith. In fact, it serves well to drive home the monergistic (power coming from one source) nature of salvation. Again Calvin:

**He therefore reminded Abraham by the external sign, that he was spiritually to cut off the corruption of the flesh; and to this Moses has also alluded in Deuteronomy 10:16. And to show that it was not the work of man, but of God, he commanded tender infants to be circumcised, who, on account of their age, could not have performed such a command.<sup>4</sup>**

### Father Abraham

Paul's references to Abraham were no mere history lesson to the church at Rome, nor should Abraham or the matters contained in this epistle merely be a history lesson to us. Abraham is the father of all those who believe, whether circumcised or not. What was Paul's pastoral concern and what is ours? Paul is certainly not arguing against a proper observation of the sacraments (although it does seem like he is always correcting an improper use of them, as in 1 Corinthians 1:13; 11:22). The church's neglect of the sacraments has been the source of untold damage to the kingdom of Christ in our generation. It would be nothing less than a blessing to God and His people if the proper administration of the sacraments should find their way back to center stage.

But it is the other issue that seems to be the pastoral concern of Paul (whether the primary concern or not I couldn't say). This other issue is that the church contains those who have performed all the correct duties, yet do not **"walk in the steps of faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised."**

When we go to the Lord's Table we ask that one only partake if they are a baptized member in good standing of a Christian church. We believe this is a biblical admonition derived from a Scriptural observation of how the table is to be fenced. But baptism and membership in the visible church are just that – visible. There is something else we ask – that you believe in that to which these elements point – or more accurately, believe in the One

---

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 4:11). Albany, OR: Ages Software.



to whom these elements point. And that is known but to you and God. Perhaps it was Paul's pastoral concern, I know it is mine, that we do not in our midst, those who have walked through all the right doors – baptized, communicant members in good standing – but don't believe! It seems to be a major point Paul makes that being part of the visible church is not synonymous with being born again. It is simply stated by Jesus:

**Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).**

## Questions for Study

1. Do you agree with Calvin that the human heart is a factory of idols? Can you think of examples in today's society? In your own life (pages 2, 3)?
2. What was circumcision supposed to be? What did it become (pages 3, 4)?
3. What is the glorious transfer that happens by faith in Christ (page 4)?
4. When and how did Abraham receive the righteousness of Christ (pages 4, 5)?
5. Are the signs God gives His church important? What are the dangers in the signs (page 5)?
6. What is the nature of a sign? To what do the signs of God point (pages 5, 6)?
7. What is a "seal" and how is it of value to a believer (page 7)?
8. How does the "sign of faith" contribute to the discussion of infant baptism (pages 7, 8)?
9. What do you think was the Apostle Paul's pastor concern for the church at Rome found in this passage (pages 8, 9)?