

What Is a Sacrament?
Romans 4:9-12
5/4/2014

What is a sacrament? We are going to look for three months, Lord-willing, at the Lord's Supper. In order to do that, we will need to examine our doctrine of the church, and our doctrine of sacraments. What are sacraments, and what do they do? They are celebrations, rites, means of grace, signs, seals, ordinances. All of these words can be used to describe the sacraments. For our purposes, we are going to zero in on three of these terms. The most important one is "means of grace." That is a description of what they do for us. The other two terms, which are in our passage today, describe what the sacraments are: signs and seals. In God's wise providence, we have a celebration of the Lord's Supper today. The sermon text has to do with the Lord's Supper indirectly: what it does, and what it does not do. We have both the visual aid, and the Word of God to help us understand what the Lord's Supper means, and how the sacraments can be means of grace to us throughout our lives. Primarily, however, what we need to think about this morning is what sacraments are, and how they are a means of grace for us. Even though this passage is about circumcision, we in the Reformed world believe that circumcision was indeed the OT sacrament for the OT church. And so we get a good window into the world of the sacraments through this passage.

Paul has been telling us how Abraham was made right with God. It happened through faith. When Abraham believed in Jesus Christ, God credited to him the righteousness that Jesus earned. This includes two main benefits: the forgiveness of sins (which is why Paul quotes Psalm 32), and the imputation of righteousness. The idea of "imputation" means a reckoning, or a crediting of someone else's assets to our account. Namely, the righteousness of Christ is credited to us as if we had done it, even though we have not.

We also see that Paul goes to the situation of Abraham in order to take away from the Jews their best arguments against legalism. The Jews want to earn heaven. But if even Abraham, a very righteous man, had to *believe* in order to be saved, how much more should we believe rather than trust in our own works!

In our passage this morning, Paul anticipates a possible objection. The Jew might respond to Paul this way: "Paul, I'm not denying that Abraham had to believe the truth. Surely everyone has to believe the truth. But the blessings only come to the children of Abraham, those who were circumcised. So the Gentiles have no part in Abraham. If they want to become part of the family of God, then they have to be circumcised." Paul's answer is a temporal one. That is, his answer is based on the order of events. The order of events is the basis of Paul's argument here.

Is it possible to say that Abraham was justified because he was circumcised? Paul says no. Paul argues that Abraham was justified long *before* he was circumcised. Why is that significant? Well, there was a long period of time in between Abraham coming to faith, on the one hand, and his circumcision, on the other. Some people say there 14 years in between the two events. Other people say as much as 29 years. The point is this: *Abraham was in the same position as a Gentile when he believed the promise!* So, if it was possible for Abraham to believe God while still being uncircumcised, then it is certainly possible for Gentiles now to believe and be justified without becoming circumcised. Abraham is still the father of all those who believe, regardless of whether they are circumcised or not.

The Jew might then ask, "Why did Abraham get circumcised at all? After all, if it is not necessary to be circumcised in order to be saved, then why get circumcised at all? Aren't the Gentiles better off without it, if this is all that circumcision means?" The answer to this is that circumcision did indeed mean something. Two words are used to describe circumcision here, and both are very

important words. The first word is “sign.” Abraham's circumcision was a sign of the righteousness that he obtained by faith. A sign is an easy idea to understand. If you see a sign that says “Columbia 22 miles,” you can easily understand that if you go 22 miles further along that road, you will reach Columbia. No one would confuse the sign for the city itself. They are distinct. And yet, the sign will not mislead you, if it is a true sign. You would not expect to go 22 miles along the road and wind up in Minneapolis. The sign is trustworthy. So also, circumcision and baptism are both signs of the righteousness of Christ. They both say, “For salvation, go to Jesus Christ.” Baptism tells you that if you travel the road (i.e., if you believe in Jesus Christ), you will be saved. Circumcision and baptism are signs, and they are trustworthy signs.

The second word Paul uses here is the word “seal.” This is a bit more difficult to understand. However, it is clear that the word “seal” does not refer to something that actually conveys what it seals. Abraham already had the righteousness of which circumcision was a seal. So, obviously, circumcision could not give that righteousness to Abraham: he already had it! What makes the word “seal” so difficult for us to understand is that we don't see or use seals very often in these days. However, we are not completely unfamiliar with the idea. We have all seen the seal of the President of the United States. We are also used to using caulk to seal up cracks around a window. Seals make something secure. The kind of seal that Paul was talking about is the seal on a letter. Today, the envelope we use just uses glue. But in Paul's day, you would melt some wax, drop a bit of it on to the place where the letter closed, and then stamp your signet ring on to it. That way, the recipient of the letter would know not only the identity of the sender of the letter, but he would also know whether the letter had been tampered with or not. Circumcision and baptism (along with the Lord's Supper) work like seals. They guarantee that the promise of God is genuine. The letter written to us (i.e., the Bible!) that tells us that Jesus Christ is the Savior of all who believe, that letter is sealed to us in baptism. The promise is guaranteed as genuine. It is from God. He is the sender of a love letter to us. He has sealed His own seal (the Holy Spirit) on the Bible and on the seal of baptism. It has not been tampered with. The seal has not been broken. We have the assurance that the promise is genuine and real.

As we can see, then, baptism and circumcision both have great value. They are certainly not meaningless. However, there is always a great temptation to give too much value to them. We can place so much emphasis on the sign and the seal, that we forget the spiritual reality. We can focus so much on the fact that we see a sign that says “Columbia 22 miles,” that we can forget to travel the rest of the distance and arrive at the city. The sign is not the same thing as the city. Similarly, the seal is not the same thing as the letter which it seals.

We believe, as good Reformed folk, that baptism takes the place of circumcision. If that is true, then what is good for the goose is also good for the gander. That is, if circumcision does not justify someone, then neither does baptism. Justification does not usually happen at the time point of baptism. And faith may or may not come at the time-point of baptism. Justification comes when faith comes. Faith can come before, during, or after baptism. But we are justified by faith alone, not by faith plus baptism. Again, going back to John Chrysostom, “Circumcision is meaningless if there is no faith within. It is a sign of righteousness, but if there is no righteousness, then there is no sign either.” Indeed, it is quite possible to have faith, never be baptized, and still have assurance of faith. Does that mean that our baptisms mean nothing when it comes to assurance? No, it is *one* of the means of grace. However, since baptized people fall away from the faith, baptism is not a certain means of assurance. When we ask, “How can I know that I am saved?” the answer lies in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. It is because we do not earn it as wages due to us. It is because Christ has earned it for us. Augustine says it this way, “For Abraham was justified not by his own merit, as if by works, but by the grace of God through faith.” Are you justified? Do you have faith in Jesus Christ? This is how a

person is made right with God. It happens by justification by faith alone.

So how should we use baptism in our lives? Or, to ask the question in another way: what kind of grace do the sacraments give us? Well, let's go back to the illustration of the sign. If you are wandering around, feeling like you are lost, and you want to get to Columbia, but are just not sure you are going the right direction, maybe because of snow, or an unfamiliar route, or distractions, how comforting would it be to see that sign "Columbia 22 miles?" It would be a great comfort, wouldn't it, to know that you are on the right road. Baptism tells you that you are on the right road. Baptism will not get the rest of the way to the city, but it tells you that if you travel 22 miles on that road, going in the same direction, you will get there. Similarly, baptism tells you that if you believe in Jesus Christ, then you will get the righteousness of Christ, and that is the thing to which the sign points. The sign is water, and just as water cleanses the body from dirt, so the blood of Christ cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

But suppose you are already in Columbia (suppose you already believe). What good does the sign do you then? Well, suppose you suffer a mild concussion and you can't remember what city you are in, but you can remember going past that sign. Then the sign would help you a very great deal in telling you that you did go the right way, and you are in the right city. So also for those who doubt their faith, who doubt whether they really have the righteousness of Christ, the sign of baptism tells you that if you believe in Jesus, then you have His righteousness. Of course, it is easy to doubt that you really believe in Jesus Christ. But that might only be because you are in a part of the city that you do not recognize. You might be at a place in life that you didn't think could happen to a believer. Most of us have been in Columbia many times. Sooner or later, even if you weren't sure that you were in Columbia, you would come across something you recognized. Your state of confusion will not last forever. You might see the state capitol, or you might see Williams Brice stadium (whatever your reaction to that sight might be!). In the meantime, remember the sign. The sign did not lie. It told the truth. You can rely on the genuine promise of God given to you in the word. God does not lie. He tells the truth. So here's a challenge for you. The next time you see the sign that tells you that you will arrive in Columbia after 22 more miles, remember your baptism. Remember that your baptism tells you that belief in Jesus Christ is way, for He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and no one comes to the Father, except through Him.

Now let's give a little consideration to folks who grew up in the church, heard the teaching of the church, and then left. They are like people who are traveling to Columbia, see the sign "Columbia 22 miles," and then decide that they are going to turn around and go in the opposite direction. Those are the kind of people that we need to, as one writer puts it, "Grab them by their baptism." We would say, "Hey, wait a minute, isn't Columbia the opposite direction? Didn't you see the sign? If you want to get to Columbia, then you have to go the way the sign tells you to go." In the same way, those who have decided to go in the opposite direction need to be reminded which way salvation lies. Oh, and trying to get to heaven without the church is like trying to drive your 4-wheel drive pickup over all the fences, ditches, and streams between here and Columbia. Can it be done? Yes, but with great difficulty. Isn't it much easier to go by the road? The road is hard enough without having to worry about all those other obstacles that would get in your way going through fences and fields and streams. Some people get to heaven without the church, but it is a sin to neglect the church, especially when such people usually do know that they should be a part of the church. That's also part of what baptism means: they are a part of the church when they are baptized. Baptism is the solemn admission of a person into the visible church. So, we need to grab those wandering sheep by their baptism.

Lastly, as we will see later in the service, when you see the Lord's Supper, remember your baptism and tie the sacraments together. When you see with your physical eyes that wine representing Christ, then see with your spiritual eyes the blood of Christ cleansing your soul of all the impurity, filth,

and refuse of sin. Renew your commitment to Christ. Renew your wonder and awe at the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ. Renew your gratitude to God for what He has done. And never forget the Holy Spirit, who applies that blood to your soul the moment you believe. When you do remember your baptism and participate in the Lord's Supper, it gives you strength. Martin Luther used his baptism well. When Satan tempted him to give up in despair, after all the trials started to weigh down on him, he would write over and over again, "I have been baptized." He knew the power of the promise of Christ. And it was the power of the promise that Luther was remembering. May that power be impressed upon us as well. And may we never forget God's faithfulness.