



“Who’s My Family?”¹ **Romans 4:9-12**

Have you ever been to a Christmas or Thanksgiving gathering with extended family and thought to yourself, “Are we really related?” I mean sometimes, in family gatherings, you can feel like siblings are so different than it can’t possibly be that you are a part of the same family. “I’m not related to them,” we can think.

But isn’t that an interesting mindset. We tend to think that “family” means that we all share the same values, and morality and love the same things. But, is that the definition of family? No. Family comprises people who have the same parentage. This is true whether by blood or through adoption.

I think we can understand this, right? And, depending on your family line there can come advantages or disadvantages. And so, this idea of family runs counter to many people’s mindsets. Have you ever heard stories before of people who will talk about a certain sibling and they’ll say, “But they’re no longer family.” They say that to describe that the other person has been estranged because of some kind of behavior. And they don’t want that person to have the family blessings. But that statement isn’t accurate. No behavior can take away the fact that the other person is still family.

Ok, so why do I bring this up? I think you all agree with what I’m saying. My hope is to emphasize that family is defined by parentage, not by behavior. And the reason I’m saying this is because of how I believe the Jews viewed being part of God’s family. As we’ve been studying in Romans, we’ve seen that the Jews highly emphasized circumcision and obedience to the Law as a means of being made right with God. If you were circumcised, you’re set for glory. You’re a part of God’s family.

Before you arrogantly think, “Those Jews totally missed it,” and then think you’re superior, remember that you don’t have to be a first century Jew to think this way. All humanity can justify themselves on the basis of their behaviors. Even religious people can think their participation in baptism or communion or profession of faith or serving in Sunday School means they’re right with God. Of course they’re part of God’s family. Look what they do. Outside of religion, people can think they’re “good enough” or that they are nice people. They serve in various ways or at least they’re not as bad as the people in prison.

In all of these things, people base their eternity on themselves. And Paul shows that dependence on self is the essence of sin. And therefore, it’s not obedience to the Law that makes you right with God. You need God to make you right with God. And that’s what’s happened. God the Son, Jesus, came in the flesh to take the punishment our sins deserved so that we could be made right with God. Our justification comes from Jesus – not us!

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

So, in Romans 3, Paul says, “For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift. . .”² Now, what does this have to do with the Jewish people and their view of “family?” Well, Paul emphasizes that circumcision doesn’t mean we’re part of God’s family because only God’s grace through faith rescues us!

Yet, many Jewish people would essentially say, “If you’re not circumcised you’re not part of the family.” They’re looking at an act instead of looking at parentage. Instead of saying, “Who’s your father?” they’re saying, “What have you done?” So, Paul redirects their focus and brings them back to the right question. And here in the text we’re studying today, we see how Abraham (the father of the Jewish nation) is the father of faith, not works. And therefore, anyone who has faith is blessed by God.

The main premise of the sermon this morning is this: **All who believe are forgiven and declared righteous (i.e. – blessed by God)**. So, if you haven’t turned in your Bibles to Romans 4 yet, please do so, and after I pray, we’ll read verses 9-12 together:

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. 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. ³

Two weeks ago, when we were studying the first eight verses of Romans 4, Paul uses Abraham and David as examples of being justified by faith. Again, the term “justified” means to be declared righteous by God, the Judge. God declares us righteous, not because of our works, but because of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus satisfied God’s punishment our sins deserved, and for all who depend on Jesus, we receive his righteousness as a gift. Again, the Jewish people would argue against this. But then Paul goes into Romans 4 and shows how this has always been the case. Paul shows how Abraham was counted righteous through faith in God’s redemptive promise. And then Paul goes on to give David as an example as well. One of David’s psalm says: ⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” ⁴

The Jewish person could read this and think, “Ok, I see that, but then what’s the point of circumcision if not to give us entrance into God’s family?” And it’s in verses 9-12 that we see Paul showing us the point of circumcision and how circumcision points us to our need for faith. In doing this, Paul highlights that Jews and Gentiles all are a part of God’s family through the same means. A lack of circumcision doesn’t mean you’re not family. No, only Jesus saves us! So, let’s dive into the text and see how Paul emphasizes this. He proves the point of faith alone by restating the premise, giving us an example, showing us the

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 3:22–24.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:9–12.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:7–8.

point of circumcision and then finally show us the purpose of God's work through Abraham's faith and circumcision.

1. The Premise: Abraham was declared righteous through faith (v. 9).

Look at verses 9-10 with me again: ⁹Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.⁵

Did God promise only to save those who are circumcised? Didn't God say to Abraham that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed? Is only the Jewish nation blessed? No. Therefore, is circumcision the sign? No. It has to be faith. That's the point that Paul brings out in verse 9. The premise is that Abraham's faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. And, as I said a couple weeks ago, it's not because faith has inherent value. The word faith, from a biblical perspective, is always to focus on the object of faith – not on the faith itself. Therefore, Jesus is our righteousness! Through faith we confess we have no righteousness in ourselves.

So, Abraham trusted God's covenantal promise of grace, and Abraham was declared righteous. This, by the way, is the blessing Paul is referencing in verse 9. Look at the verse again. In the ESV, we have the word "then," which can also be translated "therefore." This means that Paul is connecting verse 9 with the previous verses. And the previous verses are talking about the blessing of forgiveness and the blessing when God does not count sin against us. Paul includes in this, the declaration of righteousness. Which means, God doesn't only consider you as one who hasn't sinned. We receive Jesus' righteousness. Those who trust in Jesus are viewed as not only as having not sinned, but having perfectly obeyed.

Oh Ventura, let's just stop for a moment here. That's a glorious truth to ponder. We are accepted before God not on the basis of what we did or didn't do this morning or last week – or what we'll do or not do this week. We come to God on the basis of Jesus. Therefore, God always accepts and welcomes us. After we've sinned, God welcomes us into his arms with joy. When we have obeyed, God welcomes us into his arms. But the welcome is on the basis of Jesus – not in how good or bad we've been. Therefore, the welcome is always full and complete! This should change how we come into the presence of God. Have you ever come wondering if God's going to deny you or not listen to you? Have you ever thought, "Well, I haven't been good enough"? Have you ever said to God, "God, I haven't asked much of you, but now I am." All of those statements assume God bases the relationship on you and your righteousness. But your security is in Christ through faith!

Could this possibly be true? This would be the Jewish question, and Paul presses this point by now going back to Abraham and giving us an example.

2. The Example: The timeline of Abraham's conversion and circumcision (v. 10).

Verse 10 says, "¹⁰How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised."⁶

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:9.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:9–10.

If Abraham was made right with God on the basis of circumcision then circumcision had to have come first. So, it's the age-old question. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Or, in this scenario: circumcision or faith? Paul says faith. Is he right?

To ensure Paul is telling the truth, all we have to do is go back to Genesis. In Genesis 15:6, we're told that Abraham believed and it was counted as righteousness. And, it's not until Genesis 17 that Abraham is circumcised. At this, we see one came before the other. But there's more, I think. When I read in the Bible, sometimes I can think timeframes are short. I mean, how many years is it between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17. It only takes me about 10 minutes or so to read through all that; so, that's probably a couple months, maybe? Wrong! Genesis 17 is at least 14 years later. We're told when Abraham had Ishmael, he was 86. Abraham believed before 86 years old. And then at 99, Abraham was circumcised. So, it's not only that Abraham was declared righteous before being circumcised, but Abraham was declared righteous a long time before he was circumcised.

This goes against the argument that some could make that we're saved by faith and circumcision. But recognizing this timeline also would go against people's arguments today in various professing Christian circles, where they would say it's "faith and baptism" or "it's faith and speaking in tongues." Or, it's faith and fill-in-the-blank. Listen, we are saved by grace alone through faith alone! Your good parenting, your good service at the mission, your good friendship with someone in need does not make you right with God. Only Jesus saves, and faith's confession is Jesus alone can save!

This actually fits with God's promise to Abraham. In Genesis 17, God says to Abraham, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations."⁷ Does God say that Abraham is the father of only one nation? No. He's the father of a multitude of nations. In Genesis 12, God even says to Abraham, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."⁸ Think about these words, Ventura. Abraham is not only the father of one nation. He's the father of a multitude of nations. And he doesn't just bless one family. He blesses the families of the earth.

And, Abraham's own conversion experience shows us how all nations are blessed. Circumcision isn't the work and rite of acceptance before God. Faith is. Oh, I hope you get this. Faith shatters all confidence in ourselves. Think about how this would rattle and anger a Jew. I love one quote I came across this past week, **"Paul has turned the Jew's boast upside down. It is not the Gentile that must come to the Jew's circumcision for salvation; it is the Jew who must come to a Gentile faith, such faith as Abraham had long before he was circumcised"** (Stifler, as quot. in Boice, p. 455).

Think about this just a little bit more. What nationality what Abram? He was from Ur. He was a Chaldean. How was he saved? Did he have to become circumcised to be considered the father of the Israelite nation? No. He was called out by God and through faith. Abraham was a Gentile like the rest of the world. What set him apart was God, and God saved him through faith. Therefore, a multitude of nations can be considered Abraham's family because we're called by faith, not circumcision.

Think of the confrontation this statement makes to Jews throughout the ages. Many thought that you had to convert to Judaism to be a part of God's family and be right with him, but that's not what Scriptures teach. To them, if circumcision was a sign of entrance into the Jewish nation, then they also closely associated circumcision as being a proof of being in Abraham's family and thus God's family. And,

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ge 17:4.

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ge 12:3.

if they heard “faith alone” saved, they would say, “You’re not part of our family. You’re not circumcised.” In making that statement, they’re ignoring the reality of their parentage. They’re ignoring the reality of how “Father Abraham” was made right with God and made part of his family.

So far, we recognize the premise of justification through faith and then Abraham’s own example of being circumcised over a decade later. And now, the Jewish people could then say, “Well, then what is the point of circumcision if it doesn’t save?!”

3. The Point of Circumcision: A sign and seal of faith (v. 11).

Read verse 11 with me: ¹¹He 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.⁹

I think we humans can tend to wonder “What’s the point” of something if it doesn’t give us salvation. Like, why work so hard if it doesn’t validate me or give me great meaning and significance. So, we can say “Exercise doesn’t keep me from dying; so, why exercise?” Or, someone could say, “Well, I’m still saved if I’m not baptized; so, I don’t need to be baptized.” Or, think of other circumstances. A person who tries hard to be healthy and then they get cancer. Why try hard to be healthy if it didn’t make me better? Or, a parent who does all the right things in parenting and their child goes off into disobedience. Why parent well if the child is going to do that?

In many and various circumstances, large or small, we can wonder “What’s the point?” And when that question comes to us, it’s often coming to us saying, “Why do this if it isn’t going to justify me?” On a larger scale, the Jewish people in the first century asked this question about circumcision. If circumcision doesn’t get me right with God, why be circumcised?

Paul uses two words to refer to circumcision: sign and seal. First, circumcision is a “sign.” What does that mean? Well, what’s the purpose of a sign? A sign is to point you to something. So, if you’re driving on the highway and read a sign that says “Holland, 45 miles,” the sign is not Holland. The sign is telling you how far away it is. The point of the sign is to give you the direction. Can you imagine if you were in a car and someone stopped on the side of the road and clung to a sign, saying, “Here’s Holland”? We’d say, “NO! Not yet!” We need to go further. To say “What’s the point of circumcision if it doesn’t save,” is to replace God for a sign pointing to him.

Think of it a little more. A “sign” is intended to be like a finger pointing in a specific direction.

Now, if someone points in a direction, they intend for you to look where they’re pointing, right? Have you ever tried to point at something when you’re with a little child? That is a tremendous trick, isn’t it? Children don’t naturally look to where you’re pointing. They stare at the finger. I can say, “Look at that! [pointing]” And they keep their eyes here. As a result, they miss what I wanted them to see.

This is like the Jewish audience in the first century. They missed that circumcision was intended to point to the need for faith. By the way, that’s a great purpose! Circumcision doesn’t save, but it was intended to point to the One who does save! The One who makes the promise and promises to affect generations of people. But instead of going to the One who saves, they clung to a sign.

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:11.

So, Paul says circumcision is a sign. But it is also a seal of the righteousness he had by faith. In our day, we don't think much of seals, but they are still used in our culture. A seal is used to speak of a greater authority. So, if you have a letter and it has the seal of the King, do you cling to the seal or does the seal speak of the King who sealed it?

See, circumcision is a seal. In other words, the message is that God declares people right with him through faith. And circumcision is God's kingly seal declaring that to be true! And if someone then says, "That's it? That's all circumcision is?" Think with me if you had a letter with the seal of a Ruler. Wouldn't that be valuable? It declares things to be true and you have it in your possession. So, the Jewish people had a gift. They had circumcision. Circumcision declared to the world that our God saves through faith!

I'm going to take a little bit of an aside at this point because in our day, people will talk of baptism as the New Testament sign and seal of the New Covenant, taking place of circumcision. And, I personally can see a parallelism with circumcision and baptism. But, let me say this, under the old covenant, physical birth led to physical circumcision to point to their need for faith. And in the new covenant, spiritual birth leads to baptism, pointing to the reality of faith. In both scenarios, people are pointed to their need for faith.

But, for many Jewish people, instead of focusing on God through the sign of circumcision, many clung to the sign and they focused on the seal instead of trusting in the God who saves through faith. Now, I want to be careful that it doesn't sound like I'm picking on the Jewish people here. We can fall into the same trap within the church. I'm reminded of Jesus' words to the Pharisees about the Sabbath when he said the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. He meant that God's law was intended for the good of people. It wasn't meant to be a club to oppress.

I wonder sometimes if people have done that with the church gathering. People can gather with the church, thinking that their goal is to ensure that they've done enough to make God happy. So, they look nice, talk nice and serve. And they think they've glorified God. But in none of it have they actually sought to know God through dependence on Christ. **Instead of gathering with the church in order to be more impressed with God, some gather with the church to impress God and others. This means that people within the church also use God's gifts within corporate worship as a means of self-justification.**

But God came to give us more! Every means of grace is given to us to see and savor Christ, who justifies us. Our observances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are intended to point us to our neediness and our God who rescues. Our observances of singing together and serving one another and discipling each other is intended to increase our vision of the One who gives good and perfect gifts.

So, Paul shows us that Abraham was declared righteous through faith. We see it in the timeframe of Abraham's life, and then we're told that God's intention with circumcision is to point to our need to trust God – not ourselves. Finally, Paul gives us the ultimate purpose of circumcision.

4. The Purpose of Abraham's faith and circumcision: so that all who believe are part of the same family (vv. 11b-12).

Read the end of verse 11 through 12 with me: 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.¹⁰

A Jewish person could say, children were circumcised apart from faith. But Paul goes to Abraham's timetable because that shows us the essential message. Salvation is by circumcision. It's through faith. So, we see that circumcision's point is to *point* to salvation through faith, and Abraham's timeline reveals he's the father of all who believe. The end of verse 11 says that Abraham is the father of all who believe without being circumcised. They were *never* circumcised, and yet they're made whole in a reconciled relationship with God. If Abraham was justified for over 10 years without circumcision, then circumcision doesn't save.

Now, this message shouldn't have been foreign to the Jewish people. I mean, in the Old Testament, people were considered God's people outside of circumcision. Faith came first. And for some, we have no record of circumcision. There were Gentiles who were brought into God's family. Think of Caleb. He was a Kenizzite. Then there's Rahab, from Jericho. Think of Ruth who was a Moabite! And then Namaan who was a Syrian. We even see Nebuchadnezzar converted! God always intended to save people from other nations. And then with the entrance of Jesus – Jesus, who is the seed from Abraham come to save people from their sins – he made the message more plain. From the beginning of Jesus' life, God was drawing Gentiles to himself. We see magi being drawn to worship Jesus, even though the Jews wanted to suppress Jesus. We see Jesus emphasizing the faith of Gentiles. And then, after Jesus raises from the dead, he tells the disciples to go to all the world and preach the good news of his victory over sin and death.

As a result Jesus and his work, we see in the pages of the New Testament, both Jews and Gentiles coming to faith. And more Gentiles than we read about in the Old Testament. People like Titus, Apollos, Philemon, Erastus, Onesimus. Through this message, more and more people have been reconciled to God, and within this age of God's redemptive plan; we see Jews and Gentiles coming together comprising the spiritual children of Abraham. There is no child that is more worthy because of any actions in themselves. We are all children because of God's work through faith – not works.

But look carefully at what's being said here. You could read verse 12 as simply "to make him the father of the circumcised." But that's not what Paul says. He says, "to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised." Wait a second. Are all naturally-born Jews considered by God as children of Abraham?

Well, if you only think of it as physical, then yes. But God isn't looking at the physical. The sign points to the spiritual. I'm reminded of John the Baptist's words, when religious leaders wanted to be baptized. He withheld baptism and said, "⁹And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."¹¹

Wait a second. How can God make children of Abraham out of stones? Stones can't be circumcised! Right. Our need is for God to change our hearts of stone and turn them into hearts of flesh. We need a greater circumcision – a circumcision of the heart, where we actually are transformed to love and praise

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 4:11–12.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Mt 3:9.

him. Since this is the case, the emphasis of the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation, is that Abraham's children are not only the Jewish nation. Abraham's children are all who believe.

Paul actually goes so far to say that Abraham is not the father of those who are merely circumcised. This is what John the Baptist says, too. So, not all who are Jews are Jews, as Paul said in chapter 2. True children of Abraham "walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had *before* he was circumcised."

As I hear these words, I am tempted to say, "Paul, I think the people are going to get upset hearing this." It reminds me of the time the disciples said to Jesus, "I think you angered the Pharisees." I mean, their whole system is coming crashing down. What they rely on for their validation is being taken away. But, we need to be confronted like this. If we're depending on something as our justification, other than Jesus, then we need to be shown what foolishness it is! Our anger is a sign, in and of itself, that we would rather depend on us than Jesus. So, maybe today, you're not thinking you depend on circumcision, but your dependence is on things other than Jesus for your validation, hope, worth. In other words, if people were to ask you what makes you valuable, you wouldn't say God's love for you through Jesus, you'd go to a host of other things that you love and other things you do to give you "meaning."

Years ago, I remember preaching a sermon, and in the sermon I spoke on Hell, and I commented that even moral people would be in Hell because Hell is where people who reject God go. After that sermon, a person asked a member of our church, "Do you believe this?" They were upset because they believed they were good enough. This church member responded, "yes," and they said, "God wants your heart, not just your works." This person still hasn't trusted Jesus. But this person got the point. Only God can make us right with him.

Sometimes I wonder why we spurn that message. Why do we cling so closely to self-justification. But sin doesn't make sense. And so, we must pray that people grasp and embrace the message of the good news where God loves us so much to send his Son to take people's punishment and rescue them from their enslavement to self-justification. Jesus is the One who reconciles us to God so that we can actually love him and obey him. And we obey not to get him to love us more, but because he loved us first and he loves us fully and he loves us eternally!

So, where are you? This past week, I read a story about a British statesman who was struck by a 17th century oil painting he discovered in an antique shop. The painting was of an aristocrat in Spanish costume, and Gladstone wanted to buy it, but it was too expensive for him. At some point later in his life, he was visiting a rich London merchant in the man's home and he saw the portrait. The merchant tried to convince Gladstone that the picture was proof that he was related to this person. Gladstone knew that wasn't true and essentially said, "If I had bought that picture, he would have been my ancestor."

The possession of the painting didn't make him family. Circumcision, religious ritual, morality, immorality, or anything else doesn't make you part of God's family. I appreciate the words of the late preacher, James Montgomery Boice, who preached on this text and concluded by saying, "I do not know who your ancestors have been, whether they have been worthy or quite undistinguished, or even whether you know who they are. But **I do know this: You can step into the long ranks of the greatest honor roll of ancestors any human being could ever have and it will not cost you even a single cent – though it will cost you your pretensions. It is the ancestral line of Abraham. You need only believe on**

the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, and this great company of the faithful will become your family tree” (Boice, p. 460).

So, who is your family? You can't purchase entrance into God's family. That's a fake birth certificate. But, if you've trusted in Christ, you are part of the greatest family ever. You have God as your Father! You are his. You are secure! Jesus' death and resurrection have secured you for all eternity. Praise God, all who believe are declared righteous in his sight. **Even though we have sinned, and even though we fall short of the glory of God, we are his family. None of our works change our status in God's family because all of Christ and his works are counted to us!**

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