

What about Religious Rituals and Rules?

Romans 4:9-16

Some years ago, a 6-year-old Michigan boy could not be found. That night, 80 people frantically searched the woods near his home. By morning, more than 300 were looking for him. Then at about 10:30, he suddenly emerged from his bedroom. He had been hiding in a large drawer underneath his captain style bed.

It turned out that he hid himself in there because he was afraid. The evening before he disappeared, a policeman had asked him if he knew anything about a broken window across the street. He lied and said he did not. A little later the officer turned on his flasher to stop a nearby motorist. The boy saw it and his imagination ran wild. He thought he would be locked up in jail. Fear and guilt drove him into hiding (from "Our Daily Bread," Winter, 1980-81).

Guilt over your sins can cause you to keep your distance from others and to try to hide from God. As we have seen from Paul's teaching in Romans, if you are not in Christ, you have legitimate cause to fear God's wrath and His judgment. But as we saw last time, God offers every ungodly sinner the supreme blessing: He will forgive all of your sins and credit the very righteousness of Christ to your account if you will trust Christ and what He did for you on the cross.

Paul has been proving that justification, being declared righteous or right with God, comes only to ungodly sinners by faith in Jesus Christ. In chapter 4 Abraham is the supreme example of being saved by grace through faith as in Romans 4:3 Paul quotes Gen. 15:6: "**Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.**" Then in Romans 4:6-8 Paul describes the blessing of forgiveness of sins quoting David in Psalm 32.

How wonderful it is, what a blessing from God, oh the happiness of the one whose sin is forgiven! It is what every person in this world truly longs for—to be accepted by God; free from guilt and shame; not having our sins counted against us; not having to hide from God or others. What a blessing!

In our text today Paul deals with two common misconceptions he encountered from the religious Jews. Both of these problems concern religious observances. The first has to do with circumcision a religious ritual, the second with the Old Testament Law or religious rules. So in 4:9-12, he proves from the Old Testament that God credited righteousness to Abraham by faith while he was still uncircumcised. Then in 4:13-15 Paul shows that the true heirs of the promises to Abraham are not those who are of the Law, but rather those who are of faith.

Please follow along in your Bibles as I read Romans 4:8-16:

8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin."

9 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.

10 How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.

11 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,
- 12 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.
- 13 For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.
- 14 For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect,
- 15 because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.
- 16 Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all

Paul keeps hammering on this truth that God's righteousness is credited to us by faith alone because he knows how deeply embedded in the fallen human heart is the idea that we can do something to commend ourselves to God. All non-Christian religions and even some that go under the label of "Christian," are works oriented. They teach what Paul explicitly and repeatedly denies here, that at least in part, we are saved by keeping religious rituals and following religious rules.

Paul wants us to see that ... ***Salvation does not come by religious rituals or rules, but by God crediting righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ.***

1. Salvation is not by Religious Ritual (4:9-12).

In verse 9 Paul asks the question, "**Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also?**" Circumcision was the main religious ritual that distinguished Jews from Gentiles.

In Genesis 17, when Abraham was 99 years-old, God commanded him to circumcise himself and all the males in his household. He extended that command for all Jewish baby boys throughout all generations, that they be circumcised on the eighth day. It was the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (Gen. 17:11-12).

To us, circumcision is simply a medical procedure whereby the foreskin is removed soon after birth. To the Jews, circumcision was a sacred ceremony that marked out a man as a true son of the covenant. Barclay says, "To a Jew a man who was not circumcised was, quite literally, not a Jew, no matter what his parentage was."

But Paul here points out a simple fact of Old Testament chronology: God's command to Abraham to be circumcised happened at least 14 years after the incident in Genesis 15:6 where God credited Abraham's faith to him as righteousness. So Abraham was justified while he was in effect still an uncircumcised Gentile!

So Paul effectively turns the tables on the Jews who argued for circumcision as essential for salvation. He is saying Gentiles do not have to enter through the ritual of Jewish circumcision, but rather the Jews have to enter through the same faith of the Gentiles! Peter said the same thing at the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 when the church dealt once and for all with the issue of circumcision and keeping the law. In Acts 15:6 some of the Jewish believers who were Pharisees argued about the Gentiles who had been saved, **"It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."**

Listen how Peter refutes this in Acts 15:7ff:

7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us,

9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

Did you catch what Peter said there in verse 11? It is the same thing Paul is arguing here. **"But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."** Peter says we (the Jews) must be saved in the same manner as they (the Gentiles).

Paul proves that Abraham was saved that way, through faith, before he was circumcised. You are not saved by the religious ritual of circumcision. We can apply this to any religious rituals, such as baptism, communion, church membership, going to mass, praying the rosary, or whatever.

You do not get saved by being baptized or by taking communion. You do not get saved by going to church or by faithfully saying your prayers or by doing penance. Rather, you get saved when God credits the very righteousness of Christ to you the instant that you believe in Him. Salvation does not come through the performance of any religious rituals, but only through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:25).

Well then, why does God give us these religious rituals? Are they worthless? Should we just forget about them? No, **religious rituals serve as signs and seals of the reality that comes through faith in Christ.**

In Romans 4:11 Paul refers to circumcision as both a sign and a seal of the righteousness through faith that Abraham received.

A *sign* is not the real thing, but it points to it. On I-70 as you drive west past Palisade toward Clifton you will see a sign that says, "Grand Junction Next 4 Exits" Now if you were wanting to go to Grand Junction, you would not stop your car, get out and climb on top of that sign and say "I'm here!" That sign is not the actual city, but it points you to it. Circumcision was a physical sign in every Jewish man's flesh that pointed to the fact that he belonged to God. He was in

covenant with God and God's people. He was separated to God through the shedding of blood. It was a sign that was supposed to point to the purification of their hearts.

Back in Romans 2:28-29 Paul has already said, **“28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.”**

The Jews should have known this truth. Moses taught it in Deut. 10:16, **“Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.”** And Jeremiah said it as well: (Jer. 4:4), **Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, And take away the foreskins of your hearts.**

Circumcision was a sign pointing them to the spiritual reality that God wanted them to have cleansed hearts.

Also, Paul refers to circumcision as a *seal*. A seal authenticates or attests to the reality of something. A notary's seal on a document attests that it is the real thing. Circumcision attested to the reality of Abraham's faith that justified him and to God's covenant with him. But it was the faith that justified, not the act of circumcision. The rituals follow as signs and seals, but the reality is through faith alone.

What then is the benefit of religious “rituals,” such as baptism and communion? Should we do them at all? Yes, because Scripture commands us to do them. But they should only be done *after* you have put your trust in Christ as your righteousness. They then become a sign pointing to that reality and a seal that attests to your faith in Christ.

As Christians, baptism is a sign that your sins have been washed away through faith in Christ (Acts 22:16). It pictures the truth that you have been identified completely (immersed) with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-4). The Lord's Supper is a sign of the New Covenant (1 Cor. 11:25), showing that you are a partaker in Christ's sacrificial death on your behalf. The sign is not the reality, but it points to the reality. The reality is God's promise to forgive all our sins and impute Christ's righteousness to our account by faith alone. The “ritual” is a sign of the reality. If you don't have the reality, the ritual is worthless.

Religious rituals are important as signs and seals of salvation by faith. But they cannot save you, only God can save you through faith in Jesus Christ. The religious ritual are only important as signs and seals of the reality of salvation by faith.

Next, Paul anticipates that his Jewish readers will bring up the Law. The Jewish people not only believed they were accepted by God by circumcision, they also believed they were blessed by God by keeping the law. So Paul deals with the question: Don't the Gentiles have to keep the religious rules of the Law in order be blessed?

2. Salvation is not through keeping Religious Rules (4:13-15).

Paul could have again argued from chronology, as he does in Galatians 3:17, by showing that the Law came 430 years after God's promise to Abraham. But here Paul argues that the concept of a covenant promise is fundamentally opposed to the concept of the Law.

He states the principle in 4:13: **“For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.”**

Paul has already shown in verse 4 that the principle of receiving a gift by faith is the opposite of receiving a reward that you work for. If you offer me a gift and I say, “Let me pay you back by working for it,” I have turned the gift into something that I owe you or you end up owing me. In verse 14 he says, **“For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect.”**

In verse 15 Paul goes even further to say that if you seek to be justified by keeping the Law, rather than gaining the blessing of salvation you actually incur God’s wrath (4:15), **“because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.”**

The Law brings wrath because no one can keep it perfectly. To gain acceptance with God by keeping the Law, you have to keep it perfectly (James 2:10). Any failure makes you liable for God’s judgment. The Law shows us what sin is (Rom. 7:7). You can’t break the rules if there are no rules.

Conclusion

In verse 9, as I said, “this blessing” refers to the blessing of knowing that your sins have been forgiven, covered, and that God will hold your sin against you. Do you want that blessing? Do you want to quit hiding in guilt and shame and come out into the freedom of Christ?

You won’t get it by being born into a Christian home or by faithful attendance at a Christian church. You won’t get it by religious rituals like baptism and communion. You won’t get the blessing of forgiveness by doing penance or trying to follow the Ten Commandments. In short, you won’t get the blessing of salvation through religious rituals or rules. Rather, God forgives all our sins and credits Christ’s righteousness to us if we put our faith in Jesus and His shed blood. Religion can’t save you, but Jesus can. Trust in Him and instantly you become an heir of God’s promise of eternal life as His free gift!