

True Circumcision

Romans

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

Bible Text: Romans 2:25-29

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First Presbyterian Church

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Gracious God and Father, thank you for the joy of being in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ this Lord's Day evening. We thank you, our gracious Savior, that from the very day of your resurrection you delighted to meet with your children in the evening and we pray that as on that first Easter evening, you opened the Scriptures to them and illumined their minds and their hearts began to burn within them that by the power of your Holy Spirit as we too place ourselves under the ministry of your word, we pray that you yourself will be our teacher, that your Spirit will open the eyes of our understanding that we may grasp the truth of your word and that by that same Spirit, you will apply it to our lives and that through its grace and power you will draw us near to your heavenly Father to find in him the mercy that we need in our times of trouble and the grace that we need, that we may fully taste the salvation of our God.

So we pray, our Father, that you would shut us in with yourself by your power. We pray that we may be conscious that we see and hear none but our Lord Jesus Christ and so hide us, we pray, in your presence and show us your face. We ask it together for Jesus our Savior's sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now our studies in Paul's letter to the Romans continues in Romans 2 and this evening we read verse 25 through verse 29. The passage is on page 940 of the Pew Bible if you don't have a Bible of your own with you. You should find a black covered Bible in the rack in the pew that is immediately in front of you and Romans is on page 940, chapter 2:25-29.

Paul has been speaking about the judgment of God upon largely, apparently, the Gentile world but he has insisted at the beginning of this whole section in Romans, that God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and all unrighteousness of man. In the beginning of chapter 2, he has begun to direct his attention to those who have happily agreed with his condemnation of the Gentile world and he is now turning the searchlight of God's truth upon them and in verse 17, made it clear that he is now addressing his own people, the Jewish people. And so he comes to verse 25,

Page 1 of 9

“25 For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. 26 So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. 28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”

This is, I think, the tenth sermon in our series of studies in Paul's great letter to the Romans. As I was at the church door last Sunday evening, I was shown the order of service that one of our children had used during the service. It had some mystical and wonderful things drawn on it but what my attention was particularly drawn to was this particular little one's summary of the sermon. Indeed, one might say it was not only the summary of sermon #9, it was certainly the summary of sermons 4-9 and

it read like this: God is good, you are bad. And I thought what an excellent summary. I don't know if the child was trying to hint to me, I didn't really need to take quite so long to say that but, of course, the Apostle Paul himself is exploring that simple statement: God is good and the tragedy of our lives is that we are bad.

Then, the further tragedy of our lives is that we keep on insisting that we are, at the end of the day, not so bad. And so the Apostle Paul has to continue to do this analysis of the human nature and the human heart and to probe and to expose at great length to bring us to the position that he's going to bring us to towards the end of chapter 3 where our mouths are shut, we stop justifying ourselves, we hold up our hands and we admit that we are guilty and condemned before a holy God and then, as it were, the apostle is going to turn the corner and say to us, "Now you are ready to discover, having discovered how bad you really are, worse than you ever feared, now as we turn the corner, I am going to show you that God is infinitely and exquisitely good, far better than you could ever have imagined or certainly ever deserved."

This is what Paul is expounding in these opening chapters of his letter to the Romans. We noticed earlier on and I suppose we shall notice again, that the Apostle Paul describes what he's saying in this letter as "my gospel." He describes it in that way in chapter 2:16 and almost at the end, he will describe his teaching again as "my gospel." That is to say: these are the Apostle Paul's credentials and this is the gospel that he preaches wherever he goes. And we may assume, I think, that the Apostle Paul was not thinking the thoughts that we have in Romans for the very first time when he sat down to dictate this letter to be sent to the Romans. This was teaching that he had presumably given in one form or another wherever he went and particularly these opening chapters of his gospel was the way in which he had presented the gospel both to Gentiles and perhaps, particularly, to Jews.

Page 2 of 9

He had first of all, laid out the sin and judgment of the Gentile world and presumably in the synagogues there was a general agreement to that,

smiles on the faces, nods of the head, a general welcome of this condemnation of Gentile sinners. But then as the Apostle Paul had turned the powerful artillery of the gospel upon Jewish people in the synagogues, the response was the very reverse and it is one of the most striking things that you find right through the Acts of the Apostles, that great section that describes Paul's ministry that everywhere he went and preached this gospel, there was a hostility in the synagogues and he was chased out of the synagogues and often chased out of the city. From the very beginning of his preaching as a Christian convert when he was in Damascus, he preached that Jesus was the Son of God in the synagogue and as soon as he began to speak about the need of the Jewish people for Jesus as the Messiah Savior, hostility arose. The same thing was true in Pisidian Antioch and in Iconium and in Lystra and in Thessalonica and in Berea and in Corinth and in Ephesus and in Jerusalem and eventually, right at the end of the Acts of the Apostles, in the great city of Rome itself.

So, the Apostle Paul, we might say, knew inside out how people would respond to his preaching and teaching. Those of you who are teachers or speak in public in one way or another and have the opportunity to repeat the same material albeit in different contexts, once you've done that a number of times, you tend to discover where it is that people will react to what you're saying in particular and different ways. And the Apostle Paul was intimately familiar with what happened in the synagogue when he had exposed Gentile sin and then turned upon Jewish sinners, not because they were Jewish but because they were sinners and exposed the perversity and depravity of their sinful hearts too.

He has been describing in chapter 2 how God exposes sinful hearts wherever they are found and how not only Gentile sinners but Jewish sinners stand under the judgment of God and are condemned. And he knew from long experience there were always two different responses to that, one following another. The first was: but we are the people who have Torah; we are the people who have the law of God in distinction from the Gentile world. And Paul is saying, "Yes, you have the privilege of the law of God but that privilege all the more exposes the sinfulness

of your hearts.” Then he knew where the last refuge of these people would be, having demonstrated to them that the possession of the law could not save them. He knew that now they would retreat into that great sign and symbol that they held most precious in their community as a distinguishing marker that they alone of all peoples, were the people of God, that distinguishing sign of circumcision.

That is why Paul in verse 25 here in chapter 2, simply launches into a discussion of circumcision without any apparent introduction. If, as it were, we were to fill in the gaps, then Paul would be writing somewhere in the margin, “Now, once they have appealed to having the law and I’ve shown them that they haven’t kept the law and, therefore, they are condemned by the law, the next thing that will happen, mark my words is, they will say, But we have the privilege of circumcision and that makes us different, that makes us special.”

Page 3 of 9

It is to this that the Apostle Paul now turns. A very instinctive thing of a religious person to do, isn’t it? To say, “Well, of course, people without the Bible are sinners but we’ve got the Bible.” Or to say, to put it into contemporary Western parlance, “You can go on about my sin all you want but the thing that distinguishes me is I have been baptized, you see.” And so there is this appeal to a symbol, a sign that makes me different and particularly that makes me safe.

Now, of course, most of us are familiar with this sign of circumcision. It was given, you remember, to Abraham as a gracious, if painful and bloody, sign of God’s covenant. It was deliberately painful and it was deliberately bloody because it underscored for Abraham that what God was doing in his covenant mercy was cutting him off for himself, reserving him and his offspring for himself. And God meant to make out of Abraham an unusually godly and gracious people who would bring blessing to the whole of the earth and he gave Abraham and his descendants this sign, the sign of his covenant promise, the sign of his covenant grace. Of course, then in the days of the Exodus and the giving of the law, it was commanded by God through Moses, “You are to

circumcise your male children.” And you remember some of those great occasions in the Old Testament Scriptures where there are dramatic moments of circumcision because this was the defining identifying mark of the people of God.

So, as Paul preaches to them, they are now saying – you can understand they are saying as Paul has pursued them into a corner and said, “Your works cannot save you. The fact that you have the law cannot save you, rather it condemns you.” Now he is going to say, “Nor can circumcision save you. Nor can circumcision save you.” Just as one might say to somebody, “Well, these things may be true of other people but, you see, I was baptized as an Anglican or a Presbyterian or as a Baptist so I’m different. I’m safe.” Now, that’s the very thing that the Apostle Paul is dealing with. He’s dealing with people who appeal to a religious symbol, a sign, a biblical sign that they have been given, a sign of God’s covenant mercy and grace and saying, “So long as I have that sign, I am safe from the judgment of God and I’m not like these Gentile unbelievers whoever they may be.” Of course, there is a certain sense in which the person Paul now has driven into the corner is, as it were, pointing his finger and saying to them, “Don’t you dare say. Don’t you dare say that circumcision is of no value.”

Well, of course, the Apostle Paul would never have dreamt of saying that circumcision was simply of no value and so the very first thing he says, you notice it at the beginning of verse 25 is that “circumcision is indeed of value.” There is value in circumcision. And at the beginning of chapter 3, he’s going to return to that, “What advantage has the Jew?” or “What is the value of circumcision?” Answer, verse 2, “There is much value in every way.” Just as, for example, those words that I’ve just uttered, the fact that you have received the sign of baptism, you can’t retreat into the corner and say, “I’m an especial category as far as God’s all-searching holiness is concerned because I’ve received baptism. Don’t you dare say that baptism is of no value.” You see, I never dreamt of saying baptism is of no value, the question is: of what value is it? And that’s the issue that Paul is exploring in these verses.

You see, he is not saying – now notice he is not saying, “Well, circumcision is of no value because people who have real faith don't need signs.” You sometimes meet people like that, Christian people, who say, “We have real faith and, therefore, we don't need signs.” Now, that's to make yourself wiser than God, isn't it? Because God has given us signs. Actually, that's a statement of enormous biblical ignorance, although it's usually made with a great spirit of self-sufficiency. And Paul recognizes this, that God's sign of circumcision had great value. It was a mark of his amazing call of Abraham out of his ungodly world and his creation of a new people and his promise to bless them. It was a pointer. It was a sign to God's marvelous electing grace and power and it was also a sign that was to mark them off, to cut them off from all the surrounding peoples, to make them God's special community. That's why it was in the light of circumcision that God said to his people, “Now you are to be holy because I am holy. You are my possession. You are to be different from the world because you belong to me.”

Yes, says Paul, circumcision is of great value but only if you keep the law. Only if you respond to the sign in God's grace and through trusting faith in such a way that you begin to live the life of faith that holds onto the grace that God has symbolized to you in that circumcision. It's not because you've been circumcised in and of itself, he says. It's because you've realized what circumcision is pointing you to. It's pointing you to the covenant saving keeping mercy of God and in response to that sign, Paul is saying, “You should have taken hold of that covenant mercy of God through which he saves sinners. But instead of responding to God's covenant sign in obedience and faith, you have responded in faithlessness and disobedience and you have emptied the sign of its significance.” Or perhaps, as Paul is actually going on to say, “You have reversed that sign and it's no longer for you a sign of God cutting you off for himself, it's become a sign of you being cut off from God.”

So, do you notice he says in verse 25 “your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.” Now, why is this? Well, very simply: because the Old Testament itself taught Paul that outward circumcision was a sign of the circumcision of the heart which the true believer would experience. Put

it like this: a woman who wears a wedding band on her ring and fingers that wedding band while she is in the midst of an affair is not in a position to say, "The covenant is intact because I'm wearing the band." No, the covenant is intact when you respond to the wedding band in that loyalty that the wedding band signifies.

This is, therefore, Paul's great point, it's the value of physical circumcision. It's great in many respects but only as long as we recognize in what respect it's meant to be valuable. So, the second you notice Paul speaks about in this second half of verse 25 through verse 27 is that if there is a value in physical circumcision, there is an enormous tragedy in spiritual uncircumcision. To have the sign and yet to be no different from those who do not have the sign is to place yourself among those who do not have the sign. And of course, there must have been great irritation and anger with the Apostle Paul when he preached this among his own people but he would have been able to say, "I'm simply saying to you what your Scriptures say. Remember, for example, how Jeremiah moves around the uncircumcised people in Jeremiah 9," and then he points the finger at his own people and says, "And you are uncircumcised too." And how the Lord Jesus in his

Page 5 of 9

encounter with the Pharisees who are saying, "We have Abraham as our father." That is to say, "We have the mark of belonging to the people of Abraham. We are circumcised. Why do you speak to us as though we were uncircumcised dogs?" And John tells us in John 8 that Jesus spoke some of his sharpest words to the Pharisees at that point. He said, "You are no true children of Abraham. Your father is the devil." You see what he was saying? He was saying, "You may be circumcised but spiritually you are uncircumcised."

So, he says it's like this, he says, "When somebody who is circumcised disobeys the law, he becomes uncircumcised." But he says, "The man or woman who trusts in God," some commentators think that he's already speaking here about Christian believers who are Gentiles, I don't think it matters too much to his argument, "When somebody who is

uncircumcised trusts in God and reaches out in faith to his mercy and calls upon God to be Savior when an uncircumcised person does that, then they are in the position of somebody who is circumcised.” You see what he's saying? He's saying it's not the sign. Having the sign, depending upon the sign without responding to the inner significance of the sign is, at it were, to reverse the usefulness and the power of the sign so it becomes a sign of judgment rather than a sign of grace and mercy to you and the result is, as he says here, “You stand condemned. Your circumcision will arise in the last day as a witness for the prosecution against you,” he's saying.

Well, what's the reality he longs to see? It's what the Old Testament Scriptures call the circumcision of the heart. The gift of physical circumcision is meant to draw the eyes of those who received it to the God who has said, “I will circumcise your heart. Not the circumcision of the flesh but the being separated off in the heart in faith and trust and love and in obedience to the Lord. That, you see,” he is saying, “is the great issue.” And to that, he is adding this principle that there is no greater tragedy spiritually speaking, than to have the sign and to lack the reality. Indeed, in some respects, we might say that to have the sign and, therefore, to have this whole revelation of God's kindness and covenant mercy and saving grace revealed to you and for you not to taste that reality, is far worse than never to have had the sign, never to have known the revelation. It's one of the things the New Testament teaches us, isn't it? That God takes account in his judgment of the light that we have had, not the light that we have not had.

You see, my friends, because really Paul is applying here a basic spiritual principle to circumcision, we can apply this to all of these signs that God gives us, can't we? Coming to the Lord's table. Taking the bread. Taking the wine. You're saved because you took the bread and the wine, aren't you? No, you're not saved because you took the bread and the wine. You're saved because you took the Savior who is signified in the bread and the wine and who offers the bread and wine to you as his love gift. Isn't this one of the tragedies of Christendom as a whole? That we should come to the Lord's table and eat bread and drink wine and

then if somebody asks us what we were doing we would say, "I ate bread and I drank wine" and not say, "I had communion with my dear Savior, Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for me and rose again for my justification and came to be with me by the power of his Holy Spirit so that we had the most blessed communion together." You could take the bread and the wine and know nothing about that just as you could be under the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ and walk out with somebody

Page 6 of 9

with your soul enraptured by what you had seen of the glory and grace of Jesus Christ and the other person say to you, "What was that man getting so excited about?"

Or you could be baptized and I'm not just speaking about being baptized as an infant. Have you noticed, may I say this especially for those of us who think that whether you baptize infants or only adults would transform Christendom, have you ever looked at the statistics of churches where they baptize only on profession of faith and seen the difference between the statistics and the actual attendance? So, let us not get on our high horses and say because we do baptism right, it makes all the difference in the world. Alas, in both Baptist and infant baptist churches in Christendom, there are myriads of people who seem to assume that because they've been given the sign, all is well and it's exactly the same error that the Apostle Paul is speaking about here. "Do you mean there's no significance in the sign?" No, no, no, no, no, no. There is glorious significance in the sign but it's that significance by which you are saved, not the water or its amount or even the time when it's applied, it's because that sign has become to you as Peter says, the pledge of a good conscience towards God because you've reached into the sign and taken hold of what it's pointing to: Jesus Christ as your only Savior and you've come to him and you've trusted in him. Because if all I see is the water, I've missed the point of the water and though I am physically baptized, I may indeed be spiritually not just not baptized but, as it were, unbaptized.

So, Paul speaks about the value of physical circumcision, he speaks about the tragedy of spiritual uncircumcision and then in the closing couple of verses, he points us to the nature of true circumcision. Look at his words, “No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.” Now, I think it's so important for us to understand that is not simply an insight of the Apostle Paul, that's a teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures. It's God himself in the Old Testament Scriptures who says, “If you don't grasp hold of the inner significance of the sign, then you're not really my people. You're an uncircumcised people. No one who is a Jew is merely one outwardly nor is circumcision outward and physical, But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”

So, here are the three great points: these signs which are applied outwardly point us to a reality that takes place inwardly; second, these signs do not find their significance simply in being applied but in the ministry of the Holy Spirit realizing, applying right into our hearts what these signs really mean; and the result is that the person who has been heart circumcised finds his or her life no longer man-centered, horizontal perspective but finds their lives God-centered. Their praise and there may be a play on the word “Jew” and “Judah” there, their praise is not from man but from God. Now, you see it's really very simple what he's saying: God gives his people signs of his grace. And Paul is saying, “You're supposed to look through the sign to see what the thing signified is and take hold of that.”

A number of us were at the Presbytery meeting during the week and I walked into the room where the Presbytery meeting was being held with Neil Matthias and I noticed there

Page 7 of 9

was sign above the door, being taped on and there was an arrow pointing downwards from the lintel of the door, it was pointing downwards and the words read: Registration Here. I said to Neil, “Now that's a good illustration for Sunday night.” I could have stood under that lintel at that

place where it said “Registration Here” and I would have missed the entire Presbytery meeting. Now, ministers have very ambivalent feelings about Presbytery meetings but I would have missed the entire Presbytery meeting unless Neil had said to me, “Don't be so thick-headed, Sinclair. That sign is pointing beyond itself. We need to go there to register.” And that's how signs often work, isn't it? They point to something beyond themselves and by doing that, they seem to have the power to direct our attention beyond themselves and this is what circumcision was, this is what the Passover was. That's why the child at the Passover meal didn't ask the question: how did you cook this good food, Mom? But what is the meaning of this dinner that we're having?

The same at the Lord's Supper or at Christian baptism: what's the meaning? What's the gospel? What's the message? Or even better: who is the meaning? Who is the gospel? Who is the message? Otherwise, we experience what the Apostle Paul calls in his second letter to Timothy “the form of godliness.” But we know absolutely nothing about the power of godliness. It's simply a form and it can so easily become a formality and Paul is saying, “Oh, dear ones, don't you see where that circumcision was pointing? It was pointing to that covenant promise that God had given to Abraham. You remember that in his seed all the nations of the earth would receive God's covenant blessing and it was a promise that God actually helped Abraham to begin to grasp when you remember later on, he told Abraham to take his son, Isaac, up Mount Moriah and do you remember how Isaac turned to him as they were climbing the hill and said, Father, we've got everything for the sacrifice but where is the lamb for the sacrifice? And Abraham spoke these amazing words, he said, My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice. And you remember it was just as he was about to kill his son that the angel of the Lord called a halt and he turned around and there was this ram caught in the thicket and he sacrificed the ram instead of sacrificing his son. And it looks from the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures that Mount Moriah is very proximate to where our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, isn't it?”

You see, God was giving them a little hint about the fact that this little sign of circumcision on the foreskin of Abraham and his children that would draw blood was actually pointing forwards to a much greater, more profound, eternally significant cutting off that would take place on the cross of Calvary where God himself provided the Lamb. “As a sheep before her shearers was dumb, he opened not his mouth. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter and he was cut off for the transgression of his people.” Abraham couldn't see all that but God led him on to see some of it, the way in which circumcision pointed beyond itself to how God would fulfill his covenant promise of blessing to all the nations of the world in Jesus Christ. And the only reason you and I are in this room tonight since most of us, if not all of us, are of Gentile rather than Jewish origin is because God kept the inner significance of Abraham's circumcision and sent his Son to be circumcised for our sins so that uncircumcised though we are, we might turn to Christ, the one who is circumcised with the bloody judgment circumcision of God upon the cross of Calvary and say,

Page 8 of 9

“Just as I am, without one plea,
But that your blood was shed for me, And that you bid me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.”

You know, if you were of Jewish origin and you happened into this Christian church this evening, you would have understood what Paul is speaking about here very easily, wouldn't you? And the question he would be asking you and if you're here, the question I ask you is: have you seen where your circumcision is pointing? Or have you missed it altogether? And no matter what Christian symbol you and I may have been given, baptism, the Lord's supper, have you reached into it and found Christ? Or has baptism become unbaptism to you? And has the Lord's supper become starvation for you?

What a message this is, my dear friends. It's the message of this day. The message of this day, the 19th day of October in the year of grace 2008 at First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina, the message is

this: are you real? Are you Christ's? And is he yours? And if he is, here's the ending: isn't it the most glorious thing in all the world to belong to Jesus Christ and to know it? It surely is. It surely is. May it be true for you. And please if it isn't: do not leave this room without determining that by God's grace and the help of the Holy Spirit and whatever guidance any of our congregation can give to you, it will be true of you too. It will be true of you too.

Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, again we bow before you because of the sheer fascination and power of your word that chases us into every corner in which we try to hide from you and dismantles every argument of self-defense that we bring to you: we are different; we are a special case; we are not as bad as others; we are better than others; we do not share their opinions; we do not live their lives; we have come to church this Sunday evening. We pray, gracious Lord, rid us of every last vestige of self-justification and self-defense that we may be safely secured in the salvation of Jesus Christ and then discover with fresh delight that the signs that you have given to us are signs that point us to our great Savior and cause us to embrace him in faith and love and happy obedience and this we pray for his great name's sake. Amen.