

# Justification Apart From Circumcision

📖 Romans 4:9-12

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We are studying Romans 3-5, the doctrine of justification, but last week we detoured briefly into James 2 because historically, since the time of the Reformation, Catholics and Protestants have debated what these two men wrote under the inspiration of God. Paul says that justification is by faith apart from works whereas James says that justification is by works and not by faith alone. Which is it? Martin Luther struggled with James. He concluded from Romans 3-5 that Paul taught justification by grace alone through faith alone apart from any works and so he felt that James contradicted Paul and other scriptures. In his German translation of the NT in 1522 he separated James, Hebrews, Jude and Revelation from the other NT books by a space and did not give them a numerical designation. He wasn't saying they weren't part of the canon of Scripture but that they were not of the high quality of the other books in the canon because they didn't emphasize Christ to the extent he thought was proper. He gives his opinions of these four books in the preface to each one, calling James "an epistle of straw" because it contradicted Paul and other scriptures on justification by faith. So Luther tiered the canon and while there's debate on how many tiers Luther constructed, in every division James was placed in the lowest tier. We criticize Luther on this point but without being too abrasive because in the environment he was ministering he was dealing with people who held that justification was by faith and works and he was so desperately trying to clarify the truth that a man is justified before God by grace through faith alone apart from works. His concern for the freedom of salvation may have blinded him from understanding James but he did understand the critical truth of Romans and he was driven by God to get across that most vital truth.

Since that time there have been three basic attempts to harmonize James with Paul; the Roman Catholic solution is essentially chronological; they say Romans teaches that justification begins with faith and James teaches that it continues with works in cooperation with Christ; the Lordship solution is essentially a clarification; they say Romans teaches that justification is by faith alone and James teaches that the faith that justifies is never alone, it must always be accompanied by works; the Free Grace solution is essentially a distinction; in Romans justification before God is by faith alone and in James

there should later be a justification before men which is a practical expression of righteousness demonstrated by works.

My view is the Free Grace view; that two distinct justifications are in view; one before God that is legal, the other before men that is practical. That conclusion is based on the interpretive procedure of exegeting Paul and James independent of one another; just letting them speak to their own respective audiences in light of their own respective purposes, and then, after that, bring in the analogy of faith as a double check on the exegesis; making sure they don't conflict. The conclusion is that there is no point at which they conflict because Paul is talking about justification before God and James is talking about justification before men; Paul is talking about a legal righteousness; James is talking about a practical righteousness; Paul is talking about phase 1 of salvation; James is talking about phase 2 of salvation. So there is no contradiction. And it's unfortunate that scholars have not consistently followed this interpretive procedure that simply lets Paul and James say what they want to say to their respective audiences. Instead they are usually trying to bring the two passages together before they've allowed them to say what they want to say.

Today we come back to the book we are studying verse-by-verse; Romans, Paul's *magnum opus* and the first systematic theology given to the Church. In it we see that Paul starts with man's sin and just condemnation in 1:18-3:20 and then moves to God's righteousness in tense one of salvation: justification, which will then move to tense two: sanctification and finally tense three: glorification. Paul, in tense one, has taught us that there is a righteousness of God available to us apart from works that is through faith and he has illustrated that from the two great personages of the OT; Abraham, the father of Israel who lived *before* the Law was given and David, the king of Israel who lived *after* the Law was given. The key is to see that whether a Jew who lived before or after the Law justification was always by faith and not works of the Law. However, then a Gentile might wonder at this point if justification is the same for them as it is for a Jew.

Now in all this discussion the presupposition is that Abraham is a Jew. Nobody is questioning up to this point whether Abraham is a Jew or not. Everybody assumes Abraham is a Jew. What was it that made people think Abraham was a Jew? He's the father of the Jews and he was circumcised. Circumcision in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was viewed as the mark of a Jew. Therefore what is verse 9 asking? It's Paul asking from the mouth of a Gentile, **Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also?** The **circumcised** is the Jew and the **uncircumcised** is the Gentile, from the standpoint of the NT times. We might re-phrase it to ask, "is this blessing then on the Jew, or on the Gentile also?" Even though Paul has already said in 3:30 that God justifies the Jew and the Gentile by faith, he still sees fit to make this point plain again. The difficulty is, "How do you prove that?" How do you prove that Gentiles are justified by faith, especially seeing that Abraham is a Jew?" That's the presupposition of the questioner. And 4:9-12

is Paul showing us how he proved it from Scripture by showing us that, contrary to popular belief, Abraham was not a Jew.

Now the first thing he does in verse 9 is ask about this **blessing**. So we need to be clear about what **blessing** he's referring to? And if we back up to verses 6, 7 and 8 we see that the **blessing** is the imputation of righteousness as well as the corollary truth of the non-imputation of sin giving one a legal standing with God. Verse 6 is the positive **blessing** of imputed righteousness, "David speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:" Verses 7-8 is the negative **blessing** of non-imputed sin, "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered. 8 Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account." So there is the **blessing** and you can see it is two-fold, the positive side is the imputation of righteousness and the negative side is the non-imputation of sin.

Now we come to the word **blessing** itself and how its meaning reveals the nature of the justification as an imputation. The word **blessing**, *μακαριος* is a "pronouncement of...special favor." Justification is a verbal pronouncement made by God in heaven. This shows the judicial nature of justification. It's a legal verdict that is pronounced in God's court of law in heaven. It's not a change in the interior of a person. We'll talk about how God changes us internally later. But right now we're to know that justification is strictly a verbal pronouncement by God of the person's legal status before Him. When this pronouncement is made the person is considered white as snow and his sins having been removed from him as far as the east is from the west.

The question a Gentile is asking is this: "Is **this** pronouncement of blessing **on the circumcised only, or on the uncircumcised also?**" Paul had to figure out a way to answer this question. How could he prove that Gentiles were also pronounced justified by faith, just like Jews. Because what do we say? **We say "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."** Okay, that's all good and well. Abraham had faith, it was credited<sup>1</sup> to him as righteousness. But Abraham was a Jew, was he not? Abraham was circumcised so he was a Jew. Therefore justification for Jews is by faith. But Paul thought more deeply about the issue of whether Abraham was a Jew as well as the sequence of when he was justified vs when he was circumcised and that is what he wants us to think about.

Verse 10 are the questions Paul asked himself. **How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised?** That is, when precisely did Abraham have faith? Did he have faith before or after he was circumcised? If it was when **circumcised** then what the Jews said about Gentiles was true, that a Gentile must first be circumcised and then have faith. The process for a Gentile would then be to be circumcised first and then have faith. He would have to come through Judaism. Turn to Acts 15 briefly. Acts 15 is the first Church Council, the Council at Jerusalem. In the early church when there was a doctrinal dispute they actually got together and solved it out on the basis of Scripture. You see the issue

in verse 1. "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." This was an issue in the early Church between Jews and Gentiles. So what happened in verse 2 was a big debate without any finality to the issue so they decided to take it to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. In verse 4 they arrive at Jerusalem. In verse 5 you see the issue again, "But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." So the apostles and elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith." What was Peter's argument? Did the Gentiles at Cornelius' house have to be circumcised in order to be saved? No. They just had to believe. It was faith alone apart from circumcision. So back in Romans 4 he's addressing this common belief of many Jews that a Gentile did need to become circumcised first even though it had been resolved at the Council of Jerusalem several years before.

How does Paul show they didn't need circumcision here? He asks the question, "Was Abraham circumcised before he was justified? And the answer; **Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised;** Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness while he was uncircumcised. We would say, while he was a Gentile. Abraham was a Gentile. He was a Chaldean. He wasn't a Jew and never was a Jew. People think Abraham was a Jew and he was the father of the Jews but he himself was not a Jew. He was a Chaldean. Verse 11 continues with the sequence of what happened next, **and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised...** Did circumcision make Abraham a Jew? No. Other people groups get circumcised too. The circumcision didn't make someone a Jew but it did serve as something else. But before we get to that issue, what was the sequence? The sequence in Abraham's life was that he first had faith and then later he was circumcised as a seal of that faith. Now if these two events could be put on a timeline such that event A, say justification, could be said to have happened first and then event B, circumcision, happened second, then doesn't that show that justification occurs in a moment of time just like circumcision takes place in a moment of time? How then could justification be a life-long process as Roman Catholic theology insists? Isn't it rather that at a moment in time Abraham as a pile of dung came to be covered by the blanket of the pure white as snow declaration of God's righteousness? This verse proves that justification is as the Protestants said, a legal declaration at the point in time when a person has faith; just as circumcision occurs at a point in time when the flint knife cuts off the foreskin. The two can be put on a chronological time line and therefore occur in moments of time. Rome says no, justification is a life-long process. If that is so this verse makes no sense.

Let's expand the sequence by going back to Genesis 15. Paul went back to Genesis and he's saying, "Remember the story of Abraham and think through the chronology of his life." Ask yourself, "When did Abraham have faith that was credited to him as righteousness vs when was he circumcised?" The passage which discusses the crediting of his account with righteousness we saw in Romans 4:3 and links back ultimately to Genesis 15:6. In this chapter, just before God entered into a blood covenant with Abraham it says "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." As we noted a few weeks ago, Genesis 15:6 was not the time of Abraham's justification. The perfect tense with the *waw* indicates he had believed prior to that point in time. When did he believe? Way back in Gen 12:1-3 when he was still in Ur of the Chaldees! Why then are we being told here in Gen 15:6 that Abraham had believed? What is about to be entered into in Gen 15? God is going to confirm His promises to Abraham by a solemn blood oath. So the point of Gen 15:6 is simply to put us on notice that, "Hey, Abraham was already justified prior to God coming into a blood covenant with him." God didn't come into a covenant with an unjustified man. Abraham already had a legal standing with God. Now, how old was Abraham when he was justified? According to Jewish chronology it occurred when he was about 70 years old. So 70 years old is event A, justification. Then we come to the question, "How old was Abraham when he was circumcised?" Event B? Certainly if circumcision had something to do with his justification before God then it must have occurred in conjunction with the time he was justified, about 70 years old. The passage where he was circumcised is found in Genesis 17:24. How old does Gen 17:24 say that Abraham was when he was circumcised? 99 years old. So event A, justification, occurred when he was 70 years old. Event B, circumcision, occurred when he was 99 years old. Doing the math, how many years elapsed between his faith when he was justified and his circumcision. 29 years. Alright then, it ought to be clear to everybody that circumcision didn't have anything to do with it. Circumcision has a place as the verses in Romans tell us, but not in justification. So was Abraham justified as a Jew or a Gentile? Abraham was a Gentile all the way. The guy was a Chaldean! If that is so then does a Gentile need to go through circumcision so that he is initiated into Judaism before he can be justified? No way. Abraham destroys that theory. Abraham was justified as a Gentile, solely by faith.

Now that has a number of very extraordinary repercussions and that is what Paul deals with in the middle of verse 11 in the **so that** statement. **So that he might be** is Paul's conclusion as to God's purpose in justifying Abraham prior to his circumcision. Why did God do it this way? Why did God justify Abraham prior to circumcision? Answer, **so that he [Abraham] might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them.** So, if you are a Gentile is Abraham your **father**? Since he believed before you then he is your **father**. He believed while a Gentile and you believed while a Gentile. And he's considered the father of all Gentiles who believe. That being said here's a question. Does believing make you a Jew? By no means. How could it? Abraham believed when he was a Gentile and it didn't make him a Jew so what makes you think that when you as a

Gentile believe it makes you a Jew? There's no Scripture behind it, there's no logic to it and it's a completely bogus question. You can't become a Jew by believing. But Abraham is your father if you believed because he believed before you.

Verse 12 reinforces the point. **And**, connective *kai*, **and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham, which he had while uncircumcised.** What Paul is saying here in the original Greek, because this is a little confusing as they translated it, but it seems he is saying that he is also the father of those who are circumcised if they followed in his footsteps and had faith. Every Jew was circumcised on the eighth day. So they had little choice in the matter. But that circumcision didn't have anything to do with their justification before God. Now if they had followed in the footsteps of faith as Abraham had done, a word that refers to stepping in the same foot prints of Abraham, then they were justified before God. So the circumcision itself was irrelevant to that justification. Abraham was justified before he was circumcised and Jews were circumcised before they were justified. Abraham is the reverse of all Jews. Abraham isn't even a Jew in any sense of the word. The first use of Jew is 2 Kgs 25:25 in the Exile. So being a Jew, being circumcised, these things are irrelevant to justification. Justification is by faith alone and that is Paul's point.

Alright then, someone will say, what then is the point of circumcision? If it doesn't have anything to do with justification then why get circumcised? People in the church say the same thing about water baptism. If it doesn't have anything to do with salvation then why get baptized? Friend, just because something doesn't have anything to do with salvation doesn't mean it doesn't have a purpose in the plan of God. We have many people who think so single-mindedly about salvation. There are two extreme types. Extreme type 1 says that because salvation is everything and water baptism is in the Bible then water baptism must be required for salvation. Extreme type 2 says that because salvation is everything and water baptism is in the NT then water baptism must have been a transitional truth and no longer necessary. Both of these extreme type views are failing to understand a simple concept. There are other elements besides salvation with purposes in the plan of God. We also have communion and that doesn't relate to salvation. But it does serve a purpose in the plan of God. We also have prayer and that doesn't relate to salvation. But it does serve a purpose in the plan of God. These observations are simple but important. Just because some element does not relate directly to salvation does not mean it does not serve some other purpose in the plan of God. So a Jew might argue that since circumcision didn't contribute in any way to salvation then why do it? But that would be missing the point. Circumcision in verse 11 has a place in the plan of God. What's the purpose? It was a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith.

Revisiting our doctrine of circumcision. The point of the circumcision was three things. First, circumcision revealed that the fallen flesh was present from birth. This is revealed in that it was administered in Israel to infants rather than to adolescents as in pagan cultures. In Islam they circumcise their boys at the age of 13 because Ishmael was circumcised when he was 13. This isn't the right picture. The right picture is circumcision at birth. Why? To show that the fallen flesh is present from birth. We don't get a sin nature when we commit our first sin or when we reach an age of accountability, we are born with a sin nature. What did David say in Ps 51? In sin did my mother conceive me. That's the first big thing about circumcision. Second, circumcision indicated that the sin problem needed to be surgically corrected. Circumcision was a physical surgery that utilized a flint knife. Why did God want them do that? Why do you have surgery on any part of your body? Because something's wrong with it. So this was teaching a lesson. The physical surgery was showing the need for spiritual surgery of the heart. I'm sure that many Jewish boys grew up wondering why they were circumcised and the Canaanite boys standing in the next urinal weren't. So if they asked their father why the difference they were to tell them that it pointed to the need to have their sin nature problem surgically removed. So third, and most importantly, circumcision pointed to the need of having a faith like Abraham. Justification is by faith alone. The physical circumcision was just a tool to communicate the spiritual need. It wasn't an end in itself. It was a sign. What had happened by the NT times? The physical had become an end in itself. The circumcision was thought to be sufficient. They even invented the idea that Abraham stood at the gates of Hades and checked people's drawers! They had lost the spiritual meaning, it pointed to the need for faith. In many ways it's like water baptism today. Water baptism is a sign. It doesn't accomplish a thing spiritually. What it does is point to something spiritual. It teaches a spiritual truth about our co-crucifixion, co-burial and co-resurrection with Christ. But what have so many in the Church done? They've done just what the Jews did with circumcision, they made it an end in itself; as if it were actually accomplishing something spiritually. It doesn't do that. But that doesn't mean it doesn't have a place and purpose in the plan of God. It most certainly does. But as far as justification is concerned, it has no place.

So then what have we seen? We've seen essentially that Abraham was justified by faith when he was 70 years old. He was a Gentile; he was an Ur of the Chaldees. Thus he is the father of all who believe. We've also seen that Abraham was circumcised by the flint knife when he was 99 years old. It was a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith credited 29 years before. So then we see that faith is the issue when it comes to God's plan for justification and that circumcision had another place in God's plan. Baptism is the same way in the Church. It doesn't relate directly to justification but it has another place in the plan of God. So the lesson is to let each element have its God-ordained place in the plan of God and not confuse them with one another.

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<sup>1</sup> To credit means “to count, to calculate.” It is an accounting term used to refer to the amount in one’s account. We all have an account with God in heaven and we are all sinners in debt to Him, except when we have faith in Christ at which time our faith is credited to our account as righteousness. So that justification may be looked at as a crediting to our account in heaven of perfect righteousness.