

On February 10, 1990, the *New York Times* ran an article telling the world that (and I'm quoting from the article here) "the company that made bottled mineral water chic is voluntarily recalling its entire inventory of Perrier from store shelves throughout the United States after tests showed the presence of the chemical benzene in a small sample of bottles." It goes on, "The impurity was discovered in North Carolina by county officials who so prized the purity of Perrier that they used it as a standard in tests of other water supplies." "Benzene, a natural component of crude oil, has been shown to cause cancer in laboratory animals and is believed to do the same in humans."

(<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/10/us/perrier-recalls-its-water-in-us-after-benzene-is-found-in-bottles.html?pagewanted=1>)

We all recognize that when something pure is found to be polluted with a dangerous carcinogen, the product needs to be avoided and recalled, and the pollutant removed and the product made safe. The same, it has to be said, goes for the gospel. Tragically, it is not at all uncommon for churches from liberal and conservative traditions to preach a message where the gospel in all its purity regularly suffers pollution by dangerous spiritual carcinogens. It is full of additives that are foreign to the pure draft of living water that is the good news. And so part of the intention of this sermon is to help us reject the polluted water and drink in the pure and clean and healthful water of the gospel to the satisfaction and salvation of our souls.

So let me invite you to look with me in your Bibles at Romans 4, verses 9-12. Paul, remember, has been pounding away at our pride. In chapter 1-3 he strips us of any idea that we can somehow merit the favor and acceptance of God. No, we are all hopelessly enslaved to sin and stand under the wrath and curse of God. But God has provided a way for sin enslaved people to find acceptance with Him. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for our sin on the cross and provide a righteousness, His own righteousness, which God is pleased to reckon to our account and regard us, though sinners in ourselves, as though we had obeyed, when we place our faith in Christ alone. That is the great biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone in the imputation of the righteousness of Christ alone.

And in verses 1-8 of chapter 4 Paul appeals to two Old Testament sources to back up that point. He turns first to Abraham and then to David, and in both cases he shows that these Old Testament figures were justified by faith alone—which, if you will permit me a

very brief aside, teaches us about the unity of the Bible and the way of salvation. It is sometimes suggested that New Testament people are saved by faith alone, but Old Testament folks had to work. And Paul shows us here how wrong-headed that whole conception really is. Abraham and David are the supreme examples and representatives of Israel. These are the fathers of the nation. These are the paragons of everything it meant to be a child of God in the Old Covenant era. And yet how was it with *them*? Were they counted righteous by God because they *were* righteous *in themselves*? No. They were *justified by faith*. They were sinners who clung to a coming Savior, Jesus Christ, and who were counted righteous in God's sight because Christ's righteousness was imputed or reckoned or credited or accounted to them.

And as we dealt with verses 1-8 last Sabbath day, we saw that Paul teaches us three vital components that must be there if the gospel is to function correctly and be the saving instrument it is designed to be. We said the gospel is like a tripod. It has three legs. Take one away and the gospel falls. Those three legs we saw are faith alone, grace alone, and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ alone.

Today we turn to look at verses 9-12. If, in verses 1-8, Paul taught the three essential, non-negotiable, vital components of the gospel— if he taught us there that there are three things that cannot be safely left out—now in verses 9-12, he teaches us that there are also things that we might add in to the gospel that function like dangerous pollutants, like benzene in Perrier, spoiling something pure and changing it into poison.

Would you look at the text with me?

Having made reference to David, and especially to Abraham, to make his point, Paul anticipates a question in verse 9. “Does this blessedness come on the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also?” Immediately he runs into the problem of circumcision.

Abraham and David were the paragons and paradigms of faithful Israelites. Abraham was the father of the Hebrew people. If *they* were justified by faith alone, then surely that means that only those who bear the mark and the badge of membership in the covenant made with Abraham and renewed with David, the sign of circumcision, only *they* can enjoy this blessing?

These objectors would no doubt recall that circumcision was first given to God's people as a mark of their covenantal relationship to God when He established His covenant with Abraham. “Now, Paul, you say Abraham was justified by faith alone. Well. Okay, but

surely that means that only those who bear the sign of the Abrahamic covenant can enjoy the same blessings he received? Right?”

Now do you see what is being suggested? Faith alone is being conceded with one hand: “Abraham was justified by faith. OK.” But then it is being taken away or undercut with the other hand: “Abraham was justified by faith.... and *only* those who have the badge of membership in the Abrahamic community can be justified by faith *along with him*.” And so, subtly, cleverly, another qualification for acceptance with God is slipped into the mix. It is no longer faith alone in Christ alone, pure and simple, is it? It is now faith alone in Christ alone, *for the circumcised alone*.

An additive, a foreign substance, a pollutant has been craftily injected into the gospel waters and Paul recognizes that it will poison all who drink it. So he answers this clever suggestion of the circumcision party, with a simple appeal to history. He invites those who think this way to re-read the history of Abraham. They’ve conveniently overlooked a few things, haven’t they? He says to them, “Alright, let’s go back and read our Bibles again, shall we?” What a model Paul is of handling error and controversy about the truth. He takes his hearer back to the Word of God and points out that their mistake comes from not reading the text closely enough.

So what does he say in response? Look at verse 10, “How then was it accounted? (This righteousness that was imputed to Abraham, how did he get it?) While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised but while uncircumcised.”

When Paul says in verse 3 that, “Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness,” he is quoting from Genesis 15 when God entered into covenant with him. But the sign of circumcision was not given to Abraham until Genesis 17 when the covenant was renewed.

In other words, if you want to prove that circumcision is a necessary prerequisite for acceptance with God, you have the problem of Abraham himself to reckon with, because he was accepted with God, he was justified by faith alone, when he was still *uncircumcised*. When God finally gave him the sign of circumcision, it was, verse 11, “a seal of the righteousness of faith which he had while still *uncircumcised*.”

Now so what? What use does Paul make of all this argumentation about the timing of circumcision and justification?

Look at verse 11 again. God in His providence set things up so that Abraham would be justified first and then circumcised so that, “he might be the father of all those who

believe, though they are uncircumcised... **and** the father of circumcision... who walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had.”

Abraham was justified without circumcision so that he could be the father of **all those who believed** in Christ without being circumcised. And if you **have** been circumcised, Paul says, well, **so** was Abraham! But you are only his child, and he is only your father, if you walk in his steps and believe the gospel.

That is the argument of this passage, and there are at least two lessons we need to face that arise from it. Let me simply list them, and then work through them with you.

#1 The correct use of covenant signs is clearly taught here. #2 The way of salvation is clearly taught here.

First, we learn here how to use covenant signs correctly.

Look with me at verse 11 again. How does Paul describe circumcision? It is a “sign” and a “seal of the righteousness of faith.”

Circumcision is the sign and seal of the righteousness of faith, given to God’s people in the Old Covenant era. From Abraham to Christ the sign of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in the imputed righteousness of Christ alone, was **circumcision**. That much is clear, but **now**, however, according to Colossians 2:11-12, circumcision has been superseded and replaced by **baptism**. “In Christ,” Paul says, “you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, **buried with Him in baptism**, in which you also were raised with **Him** through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

Baptism **now** does duty as the covenant sign, in the same way circumcision used to.

And here is my point. Everything Paul warns us about here when it comes to misusing **circumcision**, can **also** be said for the misuse of baptism in our churches. Some of you may think that your child is safe and secure eternally simply because they have been baptized. Some of you may think that because you yourselves have been baptized, because you are a church member or a regular at Sunday morning worship, you are safe and secure eternally.

On the other hand, some of us think that since we do **not** have a strong church connection, because we were **not** baptized, because we do not belong **yet**, we therefore **cannot** belong, or **cannot** be justified. We feel our outsider status **shuts us out and excludes us**.

But Paul simply will not leave those options open to us. The remedy for this kind of false thinking is actually understanding what the covenant sign really is and how it functions.

It is, Paul tells us, a “sign and seal of the righteousness of faith.” As a sign, baptism, no less than circumcision, does not signify that the person baptized *is* right with God, simply because they have the sign placed upon them. Baptism, like circumcision, is a sign *of the righteousness of faith*. It is a sign that God *will* justify all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Like all signs, baptism does not point to *itself*. You are on vacation, and you want to see the great sights. You see a sign pointing the way to the Grand Canyon. Do you stop at the sign and take pictures of the sign, stare in wonder at the sign, and then turn around and go home? No, the sign is nothing in itself. The sign points to the thing signified. You follow the sign to the destination indicated. *Baptism is a road sign pointing us to Jesus Christ*. It says the way to justification, to right standing with God, is believing on the Lord Jesus.

The same is true for the idea of baptism as a seal. If you have a degree, certificate, from a college or university, it usually bears the imprint of the seal of the institution. The seal is designed as a validating, authenticating mark. It says, “This is the real thing. It is not a fake.” Now the thing to see here is *what it is that baptism, or circumcision, seals*. Look closely at verse 11. What do covenant signs seal? They do not seal *people*. Baptism does not seal *the person* baptized. Baptism, like circumcision Paul says, is a seal of what? Of the righteousness of faith.

Baptism, in other words, is not a guarantee or an assurance that *the baptized person is saved*. We may not look to our baptism and say, “Because I have been baptized, I *know* God has saved me.” Baptism does not seal *people*. It does not authenticate or validate *me or my salvation*. No, it seals God’s covenant promise to justify all who believe the gospel. It is a seal “of the righteousness of faith.” It says to every believer that God is faithful to impute righteousness to everyone who believes the gospel.

All of which, by the way, is *one* of the reasons why we do not admit covenant children to the Lord’s Table without a credible, public profession of faith. Baptism *requires* and *demand*s and *necessitates* faith in the gospel. It is a “seal of the righteousness of faith.” Justification by faith is demanded by baptism. Baptism shuts us up to the duty to profess our faith in Jesus. It places that obligation upon us. And unless and until we have professed our faith, as these covenant children and teenagers did earlier today, the elders of

the church rightly exercise a kind of pastoral discipline over us and keep us from the Lord's Table.

If our baptisms do not guarantee our salvation; if they are no proof of our right standing with God, how then should we use our baptisms? What benefit can we derive from them?

There is a great deal of benefit to be derived from our baptisms. Remember that they may not *effect* salvation, but they *do* point us to Christ who saves; they *do* speak to us of our need for cleansing in His blood and the power of Christ to make us clean; they *do* call us to the righteousness we can only find by faith alone in Christ alone. And when we obey their call to trust in Christ, they say to us, "God means what He says! He is faithful to save all who come to God by Jesus Christ."

Imagine receiving a letter in the mail from some foreign country, telling you that your great uncle or aunt, whom you had not seen in years had died and left you some land in that country. Along with the letter comes the title deeds of the ancestral home you remember visiting as a child. There may well be times, before you can take full possession of that parcel of land, that you wonder if it's really yours. In those times you can dig out the title deed. There is your name on that legal document. The land has been made over to you in full and without condition. It is *yours*.

Baptism says to everyone who believes, "Jesus Christ has been made over to you." Baptism is your title deed to Him. It says to everyone who exercises faith in Christ, "The Christ you trust has been given to you. He is yours and you are His forever." To a believing child of God, baptism is a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith, and the source of great comfort.

Then secondly, the way of salvation is taught here.

Scan over the teaching of this passage and whatever else we might say about it, this much is crystal clear. Paul ruthlessly closes down anyone who wishes to make circumcision a qualification or a condition of being counted righteous in God's eyes, isn't that so? Paul will brook no rivals to justification by *sheer, unmerited* grace alone, through simple, unadorned, and unaccompanied faith alone, in the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ alone.

Look at the passage: verses 11-12. If you want to get right with God, you *uncircumcised, what must you do?* Verse 11, *believe*, like father Abraham! If you want

justification, you *circumcised*, what must *you* do? Verse 12, walk in *the steps of the faith* of our father Abraham. That's *it*!

That's it! No artificial additives allowed! No pollutants, to soil the purity of the gospel. Hear Paul clearly, dear friends. Today, this moment, *you can be right with God*. How can it be done? What must you do? You must turn to Christ, confessing your need, and trusting Him to save. *That's it*.

What an astonishingly simple thing the gospel is! And how like Paul's opponents we are when we see it. Like them we want to argue, don't we? "It *can't* be *that* easy, surely. There's no such thing as a free lunch. There's got to be a catch. In fact, I think I'd feel better if there is something *I* could do. I'd be able to cling to the last shred of my pride if there was something for *me* to contribute." And so we duck and dodge and weave, trying somehow to find a route that will permit us to introduce into the saving gospel of free grace alone something, *anything*, for *us* to add of our own efforts and performance to the perfect gift of God in Jesus Christ.

But don't you see, it is only *pride* that speaks that way? It is boasting in yourself that wants some role for your own merits or works. ***But Christ will not permit any rivals. He will not share your praises with another, especially not yourself. He will not divide the glory with your own rebellious self-love.*** If you come to him thinking that salvation is a "helping hand" from God to boost your own best efforts, then *you have not come to Jesus at all*. If you think being a Christian is doing your best and Jesus makes up the difference, *you are not a Christian*. You are still in your sins, and you need to repent and believe the gospel right now!

You must come to Christ *knowing* you've got *nothing* to contribute; *knowing* you can deserve only hell. You must come to Him *utterly empty*, and rest yourself *wholly on Christ*. That is the only way. Abandon your prideful self-justifying works and run to Jesus for the salvation He is pleased to give you, whole and complete as a gift of His sheer grace alone.

When you do, your baptism which functioned previously only as a testimony against your unbelief and rebellion, will serve now to confirm and comfort and assure you. Christ is yours and you are His.

It will say to you, "Jesus has been made over to you." Your baptism becomes the title deed to Christ and the fullness of salvation He brings, assuring you that, yes indeed, you do have Jesus for your inheritance.

Faith in Christ changes the song baptism sings to you. Baptism always sings one of two songs to those baptized. The first is a song of lamentation, a song of mourning, over your unbelief and your rejection of Christ, to whom baptism points you. When you believe in Christ for salvation, that song is changed from a song of mourning into a song of celebration. Your baptism now sings over you the glories of so great a salvation and so great a Savior, constantly reminding and assuring you, from now on, dear believer in Jesus, that you have title, by the gift of God's free grace, to Christ and to the inheritance incorruptible and undefiled kept in heaven for you.

May God give us grace to hear the voice of the sign and seal of the covenant promises and rest our faith in Christ alone that the songs sung over each of us by our baptism might be a song of confidence and faith and assurance and comfort—saying, “Christ is yours, and you are His *forever*.”

Amen.