

I was taught, from as early as I can remember, and grew up believing that family is important. Family matters. I was taught to love and honor and respect and appreciate my family, my parents, my grandparents. And I did. I loved them and was privileged to get to know all four of my grandparents as an adult. My first grandparent died when I was 24, the last when I was 47. So I had a lot of years to get to know them and enjoy them. And one of the things I discovered, as I grew, as I matured, was that my grandfathers were good men, men of character, men of integrity, men of faith. My dad's dad, Charles Edmund Woodbury, was a faithful husband and father, and, while not a vocational minister, was a devoted churchman, a deacon and lay elder, a rigorous student of Scripture, and a long-time Sunday School and Bible study teacher. I received a letter from one of his former pastors when he

died telling me how much he appreciated and respected my grandfather. I still have books and Bibles from his personal library. And as if one amazing grandfather wasn't enough, my mom's dad, Lindsey Daviss Boyd, was a faithful minister of the gospel for nearly 70 years. He served churches all over Texas and the southern US as a Minister of Education, Minister to Senior Adults, VBS Director, and Associational Director of Missions. He was a model of care and affection to his wife, his children, his grandchildren, and Christ's church. Every time I would (and still do) run into someone who knew him or served with him, they will tell me how much they loved and respected him.

But it doesn't stop with my grandfathers. I've done some genealogical research though the magic of the internet

and ancestry.com, and I've found numerous pastors and ministers and faithful Christians in my lineage. My 3x great-grandfather on my mom's side, James Campbell Osborne, was the founding pastor of Prairie Grove Baptist Church in Emmett, TX in 1875 and is buried in the church cemetery. My 8x great-grandfather on my mom's side, Henry Sater, deeded the land for the establishment of the very first Baptist church in the state of MD in 1742. By the way, both of those churches are still active. And then there's my 11x great-grandfather on my dad's side, John Woodbury, who sailed from England in 1642 and became one of the five founders of Salem, MA and one of the founding members of the Puritan Church there. Now, to be sure, my family line has plenty of knuckleheads in it was well, but on the whole, I am proud of my ancestry. I am proud to be a descendant of John Woodbury and Henry

Sater and James Osborne and Charles Woodbury and Lindsey Boyd. I am honored that they are my forefathers. I rejoice that they are, physically, biologically, genetically, my people.

The Jews felt the same way about their lineage, their ancestry. But even more profoundly. You see, while I can point back to numerous individuals of faith and character and integrity, they really dialed in on one: Father Abraham. And while he certainly was the head of their physical, biological, genetic lineage, he was more than that. He was the source of their spiritual lineage. Abraham was the recipient of the promise of God. He was the patriarch of the covenant people. He was the one blessed by God. He was the one the NT book of James reminds us was called a friend of God. He was the one who first received the sign

of circumcision that set apart the Jewish people as God's chosen. And so they took pride in their privileged status as children of Abraham. They were proud to bear the same covenant sign that God had commanded Abraham. They were proud to consider themselves blessed like he was. For them, being Jewish, being children of Abraham, being circumcised, were the defining identity markers for them. Those were the distinguishing characteristics that established the boundaries of who their family was, who their people were, both physically and spiritually. But were they right to think about spiritual family in those terms? I think it's also worth asking who we consider to be our spiritual family. Who are those we are most closely aligned with and intimately connected to? Who should we consider to be "our people?" In **Romans 4:9-12** the Apostle Paul helps us answer that question. So I want to invite you to

take a Bible and turn with me to the NT book of Romans – Paul’s letter to the Christians at Rome – and follow along as I begin reading in 4:9. And as I read, I want you to listen closely to who Paul says our father and our family is [READ ROMANS 4:9-12].

Now, to give you a little background, in the passage I preached last week – vv.1-8 – Paul establishes that Abraham was declared righteous (justified, pronounced right before God) by faith alone, and that, as a principle, God justifies and forgives the wicked, not out of an obligation to reward their good works, but as a gift of His grace, so that the one who is justified and forgiven by God is blessed (happy). But the question remains: who is this blessing available to? Who can be justified and forgiven by

faith and thus be blessed? And so Paul begins by asking **three questions.**

The first question is in v.9. Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? In other words, is the blessing that comes from justification and forgiveness by faith only for the Jews or also for Gentiles? Who can receive these things and be blessed? So here, Jews are identified as “circumcised” or “the circumcision,” and Gentiles are identified as “uncircumcised” or “the uncircumcision.” Which may seem strange to us for a single ritual, a single physical characteristic, to be definitive. But it was THE identifying mark of Jewishness and descent from Abraham. You can see how important that one designation was to them. That’s the first question. The second is at the beginning of v.10, and it’s, “How was

righteousness counted to Abraham?” And then the third is right in the middle of v.10, and it’s, “WHEN was righteousness counted to Abraham?” Was it before or after his circumcision? Did it take place once he became a Jew or sometime before that? Was he justified after he took on this identifying mark that sets Jews apart and gives them special status, or before he did and had that? So WHO can be justified and forgiven, HOW was Abraham justified, and WHEN was Abraham justified. Those are the three questions.

And Paul spends the rest of these verses providing **the three answers**, but in reverse order. What was the third question? WHEN was Abraham justified? Before or after he was circumcised? What’s the answer? Look at the last part of v.10. Not after, but BEFORE. In fact, it was at least

14 years before and possibly 29 years before. Abraham believes God and declared righteous by faith alone in God's promise in Genesis 15, nearly three decades before becoming Jewish by being circumcised as a covenant sign in Genesis 17. Which means He was declared righteous (justified) BEFORE his circumcision, then circumcision CANNOT be essential to righteousness. Which leads to the answer for the second question.

HOW was Abraham counted righteous? And we know the answer already from vv. 1-8. Abraham was justified, righteousness was counted to him by FAITH. Now when Paul reinforces this principle in the context of circumcision, he's not saying that circumcision is meaningless or unimportant or a hindrance to faith. He explains here that even though the physical ritual of circumcision is not

essential to righteousness and doesn't justify itself, it is still an outward sign of something deep and inward and spiritual and transforming. As a sign and seal, it's a physical picture confirming and authenticating the truth and reality of something else. That's the terminology we use to describe baptism: an outward sign of an inward reality. It doesn't save you, but it shows that something else has. Or even wedding rings: physical symbols that act as a seal of the vows you made inwardly. So what is the deep, inward justifying reality that circumcision confirms about Abraham? What is it a sign of? His faith. His circumcision was an outward, physical ritual that confirmed the righteous status that came to him by virtue of his belief in God to keep His promise. There is no inherent, independent value in the mere act or ritual of circumcision. The cutting away of flesh by itself

accomplishes nothing. It does not, by itself, change a person's heart or their status or their relationship to God or the relationship to other people. Just like baptism doesn't do any of those things by itself. Just like a wedding ring doesn't do any of that by itself. Abraham was declared righteous by faith alone BEFORE his circumcision, and his circumcision confirmed that fact. It didn't add anything to it.

Which brings us to the third and final answer that corresponds to the first question: WHO can be justified by faith, forgiven, and blessed? And how does Paul answer? Paul says that Abraham was declared righteous by faith alone BEFORE he received circumcision as the sign and seal of that faith SO THAT he might be the father of all believing Jews and all believing Gentiles, both the circumcision and the uncircumcision. The answer is that

the blessing comes by faith to Jews AND Gentiles alike. Abraham is not just the biological father of physical Jews; he is the spiritual father of ALL who believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And that's really the only difference between Abraham and us. Where Abraham's faith was all future, looking ahead in anticipation of God keeping His promise to bless the world through him, ours looks back at the fulfillment of that promise in Christ AND forward to the consummation of that promise when Jesus returns. But since the his first coming, all who trust in the person and the work of Christ are spiritual descendants of Abraham. That's why we teach and sing that song with kids: "Father Abraham had many sons, and many sons had Father Abraham; I am one of them and so are you!" Even though we're not Jewish. Because Abraham believed in the promise of God while UNCIRCUMCISED,

he is the father of all Gentile believers in Christ. They (we) are included in Abraham's family. And because he believed and then went on to be circumcised, he is also the father of all Jewish believers in Christ. They are included in Abraham's family. It was once thought that, because Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation, you could only be saved and become Abraham's spiritual descendant by becoming Jewish. In Acts 15:1, we read, "But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" But Paul declares here that Abraham and his inheritance is for ANYONE who places their faith in Jesus. Abraham's spiritual offspring are ANY who believe, ANY whose faith in Christ is counted to them as righteousness. So for the Gentile, that means circumcision is not required in order to

be to be saved. It's not necessary. Just believe. Just trust in the promise of God fulfilled through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And the for Jew, circumcision only means something if it is a sign of a genuine faith in Christ.

So circumcision is not hindering or disqualifying; but neither is it saving. So you are only declared righteous before God by faith alone in Christ alone, and that faith can be exercised by both Jews and Gentiles, bringing justification and forgiveness and blessing.

So Paul asks three questions and gives three answers.

But I want us to see why these answers – especially this last one – makes a profound difference for us. Now last week we dug pretty deep on what it means to be justified and forgiven by God's grace through faith alone completely apart from works, and then the joy that comes

with that. But I want us to think about this Jew and Gentile situation for a minute. Where we place our hope and where we find our identity defines who our family is, who our people are. The Jews in Paul's day placed their hope and found their identity in Abraham and the Jewishness he established. But the Bible repeatedly says that not all who are physically Jewish are true spiritual children of Abraham. In Matthew 3:9 John the Baptist tells the Jewish religious leaders, "And 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." In John 8 those same religious leaders tell Jesus, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did... You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires." In Romans 9:6-7 Paul

writes, “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring...” In Galatians 3:7-9 he says, “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” So true spiritual children of Abraham are NOT those who merely have the right physical genealogy or genetic lineage or have undergone the proper religious rituals. True children of Abraham are those who have genuinely believed like he believed, exercised a faith like his faith, regardless of ethnicity or pedigree. Galatians 3:28-29 says that when it comes to our spiritual family, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there

is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." Within the body of Christ, the church – whether we're talking about all the people of God in all times and all places or a local congregation in one place at a given time – there is no distinction by ethnicity or class or gender. All who have trusted in Jesus belong to Him. And if you are His, you are a child of Abraham and a fellow heir of the promises made to him. So that's you.

But let's talk about **your family, our family**. Who do you consider your people? Who are you bound to deeply, at a heart level? Who do you feel the strongest allegiance to? Is it your fellow Americans? If that's the case, you may have placed your hope and identity in your nationality. Is it

those who belong to the same political party as you or support the same candidate? If that's the case, you may have placed your hope and identity in politics. Is it those who share your same interests or hobbies, those who do the same work you do? Those who belong to the same socioeconomic class you do? Those who look like you and dress like you and like what you like? You see how our hope and identity defines the parameters of those who belong to us, those we consider family.

For the one who claims to follow Christ, our hope and our identity is found in Him alone. We trust in Him and rest in Him for peace and meaning and satisfaction and joy. He defines who we are and how we see ourselves. We are, first and foremost, His. And if that's the case, our family is defined by faith in Jesus. Our people are those from every

place and in every age who have trusted in Christ. In Hebrews 11 we find what some have called the “Hall of Faith,” heroes of history who lived by faith in the promises of God. People like Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and Rahab and Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah and David and Samuel and the prophets and all those who suffered and died trusting in the promises of God and counting them of more value than the things of this world. Those are our people. That’s our lineage. In Genesis 12 God promised to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham’s descendants. That was a reference to the coming of Jesus to bless the whole world through His life, death, and resurrection. Everyone who receives that blessing through faith is part of our family. Those are our people. In Isaiah 49:6 God

commissions Israel to be a light to the nations of the world. People from all those nations who receive that light and respond in faith are our people. In Matthew 28 Jesus gives His disciples the Great Commission, to go and make disciples of all nations, ethnne, ethnicities, people groups. Those disciples from all the people groups on the earth are our family. And in the book of Revelation we're told that at the end of time a great multitude that no one can number, from every nation and tribe and people and language will stand before the throne of God and cry out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" If you know Jesus, these will be our people forever, for eternity. Old and young, rich and poor, male and female, every race and ethnicity, from every country, speaking every language. That will be our family in heaven. And if that's the case, it should be our

family here and now. We should have a bond with brothers and sisters in Christ that transcends language and money and class and status and preferences. Don't let surface differences separate you from your brothers and sisters in Christ. And rather than being bound by shallow, temporary allegiances to those who are not your family, extend the invitation to them that someone shared with you to believe in Jesus and join His family, your family, our family. I extend that invitation to you this morning, if you've never trusted in Jesus. Place your faith in His life, His death, and His resurrection and be welcomed into His family. His people are my people, your people, our people. Let's remember that today and be blessed.