

Romans 4:9-11

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The blessing of having our sins forgiven is available to all people, whether circumcised or uncircumcised. Being circumcised or doing any good works does not make us righteous before God. Paul is making the point that Abraham was counted as righteous before being circumcised, showing that circumcision has nothing to do with his standing before God.

King David has said in the Psalms that people are blessed when they are forgiven by God (vv 8–9). Paul has also made the point from the Psalms that forgiveness is completely undeserved, for every person is in sin (Romans 3:9–20). The question Paul now raises is: *Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also* (v 9)?

Paul asks: “Who is eligible for this amazing *blessing* of having our sins forgiven? Is this available only to those who are *circumcised*, or to everyone, including those who are *uncircumcised*?” Paul’s answer is: “It is available to all, with no exceptions.”

Again, the key point of contention between the Apostle Paul, whose authority from Jesus is to preach the message of good news to Gentiles (Romans 1:5–6), and the competing Jewish “authorities” who have slandered his message (Romans 3:8), is whether circumcision and all the religious practice that accompanies being circumcised are necessary to be righteous before God. Paul has now demonstrated that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), including those who are circumcised. Paul has also demonstrated that God forgives simply because of His grace and because people believe Him (Romans 4:3).

So now the question is whether God’s grace is only available to His chosen people of Israel, or is God’s grace available to everyone? Paul asserts “everyone.” Paul will again hearken back to the father of all Israel, the founder of circumcision, the friend of God, Abraham: *For we say, “Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness”* (v 9). Abraham was forgiven by God and declared righteous because he believed God. This occurred long before he was circumcised.

Paul previously referred to Genesis 15:6 that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness by God (v 3). This episode in Genesis 15 took place before Ishmael was born. When God instructed Abraham to implement circumcision as a sign of the covenant with God, Ishmael was 13 years old (Genesis 17:25). So it was likely at least fifteen years after God declared Abraham righteous that Abraham was circumcised, at age 99 (Genesis 17:24).

Paul then asks, concerning Abraham being declared righteous (in Genesis 15:6): *How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised* (v 10)? The ‘it’ here is *righteousness*. The answer is “Abraham was *credited* as being righteous in God’s sight while he was *uncircumcised*.” This proves definitively that being justified in God’s sight by faith is available to all who are *uncircumcised*.

Clearly, Paul says, the answer is that God’s blessing of forgiveness by grace through faith is available to the uncircumcised, and therefore to everyone. God declared Abraham righteous

before God because of his faith, and this was long before Abraham himself was circumcised. Abraham was declared righteous by God *Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised* (v 10).

Now Paul begins to comment on the nature of circumcision, the religious customs and practice it symbolizes: *And he (Abraham) received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them* (v 11).

Circumcision never made anyone righteous or just before God. Neither has any other religious ceremony or practice. *Circumcision* was a *seal* of what had already transpired. In Paul's day, a wax *seal* would be placed on the edge of a rolled-up scroll to seal its contents until it was opened by the intended recipient, similar to sealing an envelope. The *seal* does not create the letter; the seal sets the letter apart for the recipient.

In a similar way, *circumcision* did not create righteousness before God, it simply stands as a memorial, a reminder that Abraham and his descendants through Isaac are set apart to God by God's promise. Paul now introduces a concept that his detractors, the competing Jewish "authorities" would no doubt find repulsive: that Abraham is the *father of all who believe* God. Further, Abraham is the *father of all who believe* God *without being circumcised*.

The Pharisees had the idea that their access to God and His promises stemmed from their physical relationship to Abraham as their forefather by birth. This can be seen in John the Baptist's preaching in Luke 3:8. But here in Romans 4, Paul claims that there is a connection between Abraham and any person with faith, because Abraham is the father of *all who believe*. The result of this belief is the same for all: *that righteousness might be credited to them*.

Paul has already made the claim that his detractors, the competing Jewish "authorities" are unrighteous (Romans 2:17–24). Thinking again of the theme verse of Romans, which says the righteous person lives by faith (Romans 1:16–17), Paul might be implying here that these detractors are not even legitimate sons of Abraham because they are not living by faith, and Abraham is the father of all who believe. As Paul said in Romans 2:25, the circumcision of the competing Jewish "authorities" had become uncircumcision.

Biblical Text

9 Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." 10 How then was it credited? 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 uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them,