

Introduction...

There are times when I am preparing a sermon and I know that the subject matter is going to make some of you uncomfortable. There are times when I think, "Oh this should be helpful." Or "This will be difficult" or even "this is going to be offensive." It's not my intention to be offensive but I know that God's Word has that effect on our hearts, so in those moments I want to check my own heart, try to say things carefully and be faithful to the text. But in the end I often have a good idea of how the sermon is going to impact the congregation.

But there are rarely those times when I know the sermon is going to make half of you squirm and uncomfortable; today is one of those days because our subject is ***circumcision***.

Now we know that this issue comes up throughout Scripture and our understanding of why it's a thing could range from, "I have no clue" to "Got it! Let's move on." Many of us understand that it's more of an Old Testament/Old Covenant command and we are New Covenant people so why even bring it up? The reason we need to bring it up is because it's right here in our text and in some way it is becoming a hindrance to the Colossians church.

In Colossians, and other books of the NT, the issue of circumcision hasn't gone away, in fact it is a main point of emphasis in several books of the NT. Jesus talks about it quite a bit in the gospels of Luke and John. Circumcision comes front and center in the book of Acts. Paul addresses it in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and it even comes up in the book of Titus.

Circumcision was a very significant issue/problem for the early church and that's why we see it in our text this morning. But you'll notice that the way Paul talks about it is very different from the way it was viewed in the OT. So let's read the text and try to understand why this issue has come up again and what it means now that Christ has come.

Transition...

Col 2:11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Sermon Focus...

Let's remember that in this section Paul is addressing false teaching that is aimed to cause the church to put their confidence in something other than Christ. Some Bible scholars believe that the false teachers are exclusively Jewish and you can see why in this section. But Paul's wants the church to understand that while Jewish tradition is valuable and important, it all points to Jesus. In verse 17 he says that the traditions and laws are but a shadow while Christ is the substance.

So Paul's point in these verses is to show how Jesus is better and in verses 11-15 he wants to teach us 4 ways that Jesus and His gospel are better.

I. Jesus is better because He solves the problem in our heart (V. 11)

One of the most significant debates that the early church had to work through was the issue of how much Jewish law and tradition would continue into the life of the church. Should Christians be circumcised as well as baptized? Should Christians observe the Passover and the Lord's Supper? Should Christians go to temple on the Sabbath and gather with the church on Sunday (the Lord's Day)? These were questions that needed to be answered, but at first they weren't pressing.

The early church was made up of Jews who had all been circumcised, who observed Passover and who went to temple on Sabbath (Saturday). But when the gospel began to spread to the Gentiles, these issues came front and center. ***A little history on this issue...***

In **Acts 10** God gave Peter a vision and this vision would motivate him to go to the house of a Gentile named Cornelius, an Italian soldier who loved God. When Peter came to Cornelius' house he shared the gospel with everyone present. And while Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on everyone in the house and they began to speak in tongues even though they were uncircumcised.

Now this is incredibly significant and here's why. The Old Testament demonstrated that in order for God's presence to dwell in the midst of His people they must be ritually pure and to be ritually pure meant circumcision, it meant that sacrifices had to be offered, it meant strict dietary laws, and they needed to have a consecrated priesthood serving as a mediator. There were even times when all of this was in place and God would still not allow the people to come into His presence. All of this was to demonstrate that the sinfulness of man is a barrier to fellowship with our holy God.

But in Acts 10 we see this whole paradigm turned upside down. God's presence has fallen on a group of people who were uncircumcised, ritually unclean, Gentiles. They had made no sacrifices to atone for their sin, they had no priesthood mediating for them and yet they believe the gospel and have been filled with the Holy Spirit. God is pleased to dwell, not just near, but within these people despite their lack of adherence to the law of Moses. **This was amazing and confusing at the same time.**

Shortly after this, Paul and Barnabas begin their ministry together and they too preached the gospel to the Gentiles, many of whom believed. Gentiles were getting saved and were being filled with the Holy Spirit but many of the Jews weren't comfortable with what was taking place. The whole situation came to a head in **Acts 15**.

1 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." **2** And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. **5** But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

So here we see a group of Jewish believers who were convinced that in order for Gentile Christians to be justified in the eyes of God, they must be circumcised and they must keep the law of Moses. This sparked a big debate and in the end a decision was reached. Both Peter and James spoke up and here is what they had to say.

Acts 15:7 ...Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and

believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, ***why are you putting God to the test*** by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Then James, the brother of Jesus, stood up and said...

28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

Now why am I bringing up all of this history and this old debate? Because I believe this debate is what Paul is dealing with in the book of Colossians. The issue of circumcision simply will not go away and this debate has found its way into this young church. A group of people, most likely a group known as Judaizers, had begun to teach that in order for these Gentiles to be truly saved they must undergo circumcision according to the law of Moses.

These same men had begun to teach that Christ wasn't enough. That faith wasn't sufficient and if these people truly wanted to be the people of God they must become Jews, be circumcised and then obey the law of Moses.

But Paul says here in **Colossian 2:11** that won't be necessary because, as believers in Christ, they ***have already been circumcised***.

Col 2:11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

Paul is making a distinction between circumcision performed by man in the flesh and circumcision performed by Christ in the heart. **And this is what the practice of circumcision has been pointing to all along.**

In Genesis 17 we see God command Abraham to institute circumcision as a sign of God's covenant relationship with him. There wasn't much explanation as to why this was taking place, just that God wanted it to be a sign of his covenant with Abraham.

Then later in Exodus we see it come up again. Moses' son has to be circumcised so that Moses didn't die under the wrath of God and then when the law is given at Sinai it includes circumcision. And in the law we learn that circumcision is the external and physical sign of the covenant relationship between God and His people. **It was an outward mark of the relationship that existed and it symbolized that in order for man to come into relationship with God, something needed to be removed from us, our sin needed to be removed from us.**

As a symbol, circumcision pointed to a deeper truth that went beyond the physical act.

Circumcision was designed as a metaphor to show us the deep need of our soul. There is sin in us and it rests in our hearts and this sin in our hearts needs to be cut away if we are to have peace and fellowship with God.

This is what Moses taught in **Deuteronomy 10:16** when he says, "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and no longer be stubborn." He is saying, "As the foreskin is cut away from your flesh, your stubborn rebellion needs to be cut away from your heart."

But how can we cut the rebellion out of our own hearts? We can't, but God can.

In **Deuteronomy 30:6** Moses passed on this promise, "The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." In order for us to live as the people of God we need God to remove the sin from our hearts.

And Paul is saying that this has already happened in those who believe. He is saying that what marks us as the people of God is not the circumcision of our flesh but the circumcision of our hearts, which is evidenced by our conversion. IOW, when you were born again this took place. When the gospel was preached and the Holy Spirit opened the eyes of your heart showing you that you were a sinner in need of Christ, that is when this circumcision in your heart took place.

God called you from death to life and the Spirit removed your heart of stone and gave to you a heart of flesh and you received Christ Jesus as Lord. You believed the gospel and repented of your sin and you believe today; all of this is evidence that your **Christian circumcision** is complete.

We needed a circumcision of the heart and only Jesus provides that for us. ***Jesus is Better in that He Cures the Problem in our Hearts.*** But there is another way that Jesus is better...

II. Jesus is Better Because He Has Given Us New Life (V. 12)

12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him...

Circumcision as a symbol pointed to our need for God to remove the sin from our heart. Baptism as a symbol points to the reality that by faith in Christ ***we have been circumcised*** in our hearts and ***we have been raised*** from death to live a new life. And it seems quite clear that Paul understands Christian baptism to have taken the place of circumcision as the outward sign of our covenant relationship with God.

Circumcision, as a religious rite and symbol, pointed beyond itself to a deeper spiritual reality that God would address in the future. Baptism does the same thing but in a different way. It points beyond itself to the spiritual realities that God has ***already*** accomplished in us when we believed. Circumcision pointed forward to Jesus and baptism points back to Jesus.

And for all those who trust in Christ for salvation and who are baptized in obedience to Him, Paul wants us to understand that everything that Christ accomplished for us has been applied to us. Paul loves to use the language of "in Christ", "with Christ", "through Christ" and when he does this he is showing that the blessing of salvation, the security of eternal life, the power of Christ's redeeming blood have already been applied to us.

And this is what baptism symbolizes? Here in verses 12-13 Paul teaches us to understand that Baptism symbolizes our ***involvement, our mysterious but very real involvement***, in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Christ died and by faith we died with Him. Christ was buried and by faith we were buried also. Christ was raised from the dead by the power of God and by faith we too have been raised from the dead. Christ is alive and by faith we too are alive in a way that we weren't alive before we believed the gospel.

As believers in Christ, we have spiritual life in us and that life didn't become ours when we were circumcised. It didn't become ours when we got our act together and began keeping the law. It became ours when we heard the gospel and believed.

Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live **by faith** in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

2 Cor 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself.

Jesus is better because he removes sin from our hearts. Jesus is better because in Him we have new life, and Jesus is better because in Him we have forgiveness of sins.

III. Jesus is Better because in Him we have the Forgiveness of Sins (V. 13c-14)

V. 13c...having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Listen to this phrase again, "In Christ, God has forgiven us **all** our trespasses." Christian your forgiveness is complete and definitive. All of our sins are forgiven.

"Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe; sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow."

Forgiveness makes our hearts sing and in Christ we have been forgiven all of our sins. Paul understands that this truth, more than others, brings joy and freedom to our hearts; so he doesn't just teach us about forgiveness with cold logic. **He paints pictures for our minds.**

First he says we should understand our forgiveness in this sense that there was once a record of debt that stood against us. The judge held it in his hands and he read off all the charges that we were required to pay. In the end, the sum total of our debt couldn't be paid. We couldn't buy ourselves out of it and the law demanded that we give our lives to pay the price, "for the wages of sin is death."

But Christ came and he took the ledger in His own hands. He paid our debt and covered our sin, past present and future. There is no longer a record of wrongs that can be held against us in court. Our debt has been cancelled, obliterated, erased completely.

The second image brings joy as well but with a more somber tone. Paul wants us to see that this debt was paid in full but it still came at a cost. Our debt was paid by Christ himself. When Christ was crucified he wasn't paying for his own crimes, he was paying for ours. And He paid our debt to the very last drop and then he died to show that the sentence had been carried out.

Jesus was nailed to the cross as payment for our sin but He didn't remain on that cross. His body was taken down and placed in a tomb, but even that was not the end. He was raised. He was raised from the dead, showing that God the Father accepted His offering as paid in full.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Was nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

Jesus is better because He fully took upon Himself the due penalty for the sins of all those who believe.

IV. Jesus is better because His victory results in our salvation (V. 15)

¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Paul has one last image he wants to paint for us in this section and this image is that of Jesus as a triumphant King who rules over every authority. Jesus is the valiant warrior who stepped onto the battlefield to defeat his enemies and ours. We didn't lift a finger in this fight, He did it all and it was hardly a contest.

He triumphed over every ruler and he defeated every authority in creation. He conquered every human king and he disarmed every spiritual being with one devastating blow. He put them to open shame; this phrase should actually read *that He stripped them bare*, removing every hint of power they had and He triumphed over them singlehandedly.

The false teachers who want to lead us away from Christ with their plausible words, they stand no chance. The Judaizers who claim to know the secrets of how we can truly get our names written in God's book of life, they are powerless against this Champion. The modern-day false prophets who teach that God's favor comes to those who name it, claim it and pay money to get it, they will be stripped of their high-priced and high-quality garments when they stand before Jesus.

Jesus Christ is better than all of them and His victory over sin, death and Satan has resulted in our salvation.

Conclusion...

So what does all of this mean? It means that there is nothing that you can add to the work of Christ that will make you more saved or more secure as a child of God. The mark of circumcision already rests upon you because of your faith in Christ. You have been born again by the power of the Holy Spirit to believe in Jesus and that is enough. All of your sins are forgiven, your debt is cancelled, the record was nailed to the cross and you bear it no more. In Christ's victory you have received salvation and eternal life. All that He accomplished, all that He promised, all that He offers is yours, not by your works but by faith in Him.

But why do so many of us try to attach works to our faith? Why are all the religions in this world, save Biblical Christianity, so bent on creating a system of works that they promise will result in your salvation? Because faith is hard and we would rather take matters into our own hands.

It's easier to go to mass and say a few hail Mary's than it is to feel sorrow over your sin and truly live a life of repentance and faith. It's easier to make a trip to Mecca and mark off one of the 5 pillars on your list than it is to trust that Christ's death, burial and resurrection are all that you need. It's easier for us to give \$100 to plant a "seed of faith" in the hopes of reaping a 10-fold reward than it is to battle the sin of greed and trust that the greatest gift we can receive is salvation by faith in Christ alone.

Grace is hard because it demands we trust our souls into the hands of someone other than ourselves and at the same time grace is the most comforting thing because if we've ever tried to be religious we know how much of a failure we are at it.

Brothers and sisters Jesus is better so put all of your hope in Him. Rest in His victory knowing that by His triumph we too are more than conquerors.