

Spiritual Circumcision

Colossians 2:11-12

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Well, we've been continuing our journey through the book of Colossians, and last week we looked at verses 8 through 10. We considered the warning that the Apostle Paul was giving to the church of Colossae. That warning was simply this: they were to beware and be warned against philosophies and empty deceits that were described and characterized by traditions and everything else but Christ. Paul warned them about this, but we also looked at the fact that he wasn't just satisfied with warning the people. He understood that warning was insufficient. It's good, it's important, and it is commanded, but warning is not enough. We need to be educated.

Paul begins to not only warn them but in verses 9 and 10, he educates them. He teaches them concerning Christ, and he teaches them that in Christ, He is the fullness of God. You can't find God in anything else or anyone else; you come to Him through Jesus Christ. He goes on to explain to them also that they needed to recognize something about themselves: that because Christ is this exalted One and they are in Him, therefore they are complete, they are filled full.

We looked at the fact that false teaching and philosophies tend to draw us away because they try to help us, they try to make us think that there is more to be had and that there is more to be had outside of Christ. We went through that and looked at different philosophies, which I won't continue on doing today. But what we are continuing in this week and next week is this very truth: that warning is not enough; therefore, we must be educated.

The reality is this: we have been warned in this passage in verse 8, but the next warning comes in verse 18. That's 10 verses between warnings. What is Paul doing in those 10 verses? He is educating the church so that they might be secure in their understanding of Christ and of who they are in Him. And if it was good for the Colossians, it's good for us.

You see, I can warn you week to week to week: don't do this, don't do that, be careful of that. But unless you are taught about who Christ is and about who we are in Him, you will not truly be safeguarded against future

deceptions and present deceptions.

You can think about it this way: in the world today, we have quack doctors, doctors that think they do medicine but really they do deception. They basically prey on the ignorant, those that have no understanding of medicine or understanding of health. The quack doctors scam them, saying you need this and you need this and you need that; don't worry about these guys, they don't know what they are telling you, so come over here and I'll make you well. And so, people that are ignorant are the ones that get preyed on by these quack doctors; they're the ones that get scammed.

They get scammed not necessarily because they're not warned; that's part of it. Part of the problem is that they're not warned. Part of the reason why people are scammed is because they're not warned. But the truth is that we have on the news many warnings saying be careful of scams, beware of scams, beware of scams, but people still get scammed. And it's because they're not only not warned, but they're not educated in what is truth and how to discern what is truth from error, how to discern what a scam is or isn't.

A quack doctor or a doctor that was deceitful could not deceive a medical professional. He may be able to deceive those who do not know much about medicine, do not know much about health, but anyone who has an understanding in that field, he'll have a hard time trying to deceive them. And that is because with knowledge comes discernment, and with knowledge comes understanding, and with understanding becomes a security in our hearts. And with that understanding, we can be prepared, or we are prepared, not only for the present deceptions but for the future ones to come.

And so, we need to understand what it is that Paul's doing and jump on board, as it were, and learn for ourselves what are the lessons that he's trying to teach the Colossians that will keep them from future error, that will keep them from future harm, and what are we to learn about this and how this keeps us from future error and will keep us from future harm. And this is very, very important for us to understand.

Now, before I get into this passage of scripture, I must make a note on baptism. Look at verses 11 and verse 12. This passage, I'll read it for you now, it says, "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

Now, the word "baptism" appears here, and it is important to understand that this is the major proof text, or one of the major texts that are used by those who believe in infant baptism to show that infants should be baptized. You, at first glance, might say, "How is that possible?" Well, they essentially say that circumcision has been replaced by baptism, and therefore, just as children were brought into the old covenant through circumcision, so in the new covenant, baptism replaces circumcision, and therefore children are brought into the covenant community of the people of God today through the waters of baptism. That's essentially the teaching of a lot of Protestant churches, many of those churches obviously are friends.

But it's important for me to bring this out just briefly to make a few points and comments before we move on. Firstly, what we need to understand when we look at this passage is that baptism here in this passage is not the counterpart to circumcision. It is not showing that it's replaced. In fact, what he says here in verse 11 is, "In Him you were circumcised," and then he says, "with the circumcision not made with hands." He's arguing here, Paul is arguing, that what the New Testament counterpart or equivalent to Old Testament circumcision is, is New Testament circumcision, which is a circumcision of the heart. It is spiritual circumcision.

And why does he bring baptism into it? Well, he brings baptism into it because baptism is the public expression of that spiritual circumcision that has taken place in our hearts. As we have been changed anew, as we looked at this morning, and have been brought into Christ through the work of regeneration and have entered into the new covenant through faith in Christ. He says here in this passage that we've done this, as it were, in baptism. And that baptism is through faith, or that raising up is through faith.

And the idea here is simply this: that in one sense, let me just make a point of this, the point is this: the old covenant people and the new covenant people are different. And what I mean by that is this: the way you entered the old covenant was different from the way you entered the new covenant. The old covenant was mixed. Children were circumcised, but they grew up not knowing the Lord. And this is what the nation of Israel was, and they kept the sign of the covenant and were read there.

But New Testament, New Covenant Christianity, we enter into a change of life. Okay, that is the new covenant: "I will take out their old heart, put a new heart, I put my Spirit within you that they may walk in their ways." And the point is simply this: that there is no one in the new covenant that is not regenerated. Whereas in the old covenant, you could be part of it and not be regenerated because you entered by circumcision. And that's the distinction that we must remember when we come to the issue of bap-

tism.

And just to make a point of that, in case you ever have discussions with our wonderful Presbyterian friends and others. And so, the point is here: baptism is, yes, a sign of the new covenant, but remember, the new covenant is different from the old covenant, the way we get in and the people. And so, I just wanted to make that a point.

And the last point in saying that is verse 12: "We're buried with Him in baptism, in which you were raised with Him through faith." And the indication there is those that are being baptized are raising through faith, which is something that an infant cannot do. And so, that's something that we have to remember as we approach this text of scripture.

But I don't want to bog you down in the debate of baptism this morning, but my intention was to give you some insight into the text as we look on through. Now, I want us to see in verse 11 and verse 12 that we're also introduced to this word "circumcision." And you may be thinking, "Circumcision? To 21st-century Western people, circumcision is essentially foreign." We know what it is because it's not that foreign; it's still practiced generally, but it doesn't have the same meaning as it had in the time of Paul and in the time of the scriptures. And so, it's important for us to get an understanding of it.

Why is Paul introducing us to circumcision? That's a very interesting question to ask, and it's important that we have an answer to it. Paul is trying to help us understand what true circumcision is. Now, in the Bible times, there were people that were bringing false teaching, and part of that false teaching was to bring New Testament believers back under the old covenant. They would say, "Yes, you believed in Jesus, yes, you've trusted Jesus as your Savior, yes, you know Him as that, but you are not complete until you are circumcised. You see, this is a covenant that God made with Abraham, and the true people of God are those that are circumcised. And so, it's not enough to just believe in Jesus; there is more to be had. You must have circumcision." They were also bringing other things like the keeping of the Sabbath in verse 16. And so, we see that in all these festivals, new moons, and Sabbath days, Paul is trying to make a point here by saying that circumcision is, we are circumcised, but not in the same way that they were circumcised. He's trying to help them understand that Paul is introducing circumcision to deal with false teaching, to help them be aware of the subtleties.

You see, these subtleties are very subtle because they carry with them the scripture. And they still exist today, by the way, not necessarily maybe with circumcision, but there are many that say, "Oh, you see, we've missed

out on a whole chunk of our Bible here in the Old Testament. And so, what we need to do is somehow incorporate all those things that are in the Old Testament into our Christian experience." And then you have dietary laws coming into the Christian faith, you have the observance of days, months, years, and you have a generation of a group of Christians that seek to make other Christians feel like they are not complete until they enter into the fullness of all that God requires. This is subtle, and therefore we must be aware.

And so, Paul introduces circumcision because this was obviously an issue that was facing the early church and has relevance even to us today. But the question we may be asking ourselves is, what is the big deal about circumcision? What's the big deal? Why was it such a big issue? And we were read to this morning from the passage of scripture which first introduces us to circumcision. This is the first reference to it, and this regards Abraham and God's covenant promise with Abraham. You see, God called Abraham to Himself and blessed him and said, "I am going to make a covenant with you that I'm going to give you land, I'm going to give you offspring, and I'm going to bless you abundantly so that your people will be more blessed above all the people of the families of the earth. Anyone that curses you will be cursed, and anyone that blesses you will be blessed." And so, God made these promises to Abraham. But God did not stop at the promise. He made a promise but included in that promise, He said to them, "Now this will be the sign of the covenant. This will be the sign that you belong to me. This would be the outward expression that you are My people, and I am your God. This would be the sign that I am committed to you in a covenant relationship." He says, "You take every male son, and at the age of eight days old, when he's eight days old, you circumcise the foreskin of his flesh. And in circumcision, the generations and the generations and the generations will come to know that I am the Lord which has covenanted with you, Abraham, and with your descendants." That's a big thing.

In fact, it was such a big thing to the children of Israel that you remember Samson and others saying, "I will destroy the uncircumcised Philistines." It became such a statement of pride and national pride that they were the people that were circumcised, and the rest of the people were considered the uncircumcised. They were the ones that weren't part of God's covenant. They weren't part of God's blessing. They weren't part of God's promise and all the blessings that existed within the promise. And so, it became an issue. And as a man by the name of Garland says, "For most Jews in the first century, circumcision had become the fundamental identity badge for membership in God's people." It was their membership badge, as it were. And everyone else was called the uncircumcised, and it was derogatory.

Now that has a lot of implications for coming into the New Testament, doesn't it? Here are these people, the first people to be saved and to know Christ were circumcised people, Jews. And they had to work out in their minds, "What do we do with this circumcision? God made promises to our fathers, and now here, after the cross, surely that promise hasn't been annulled. Surely those things within there and the signs are meant to be kept." And then the other problem arises, "How can these people that are Gentiles, that are also now coming into our community, into the church, and they're uncircumcised, hang on, how can someone be the people of God if they're not circumcised? Isn't this the covenant that God made with our father Abraham?" And you can just imagine the tension or the questions that floated in the hearts and minds. In fact, this was such an issue that in Acts chapter 15, the Bible says that there were people that came up and saying, "Unless you be circumcised according to the law of Moses, you cannot be saved." Very strong issue here. And this is a problem that threads its way right throughout the Bible, right throughout the New Testament, and it's important for us to realize it.

Now, what also is important to realize is God was not just satisfied with Old Testament physical circumcision. In the Old Testament, God said that, "I will circumcise the foreskin of your hearts." He actually says it to them and commands them, "Circumcise your hearts, circumcise your ears." What He was simply trying to say to them is that that was an outward sign. But what God always desired was more than just a sign. He desired an inward reality. He desired that His people would know Him, not just be external, as it were, in their keeping of God's law. Go to Romans chapter 2 with me as we look at this before we move on.

Romans chapter number 2, and I want us to look at verse number 25 to 29. It says, "For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law, but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Listen to those words, 'your circumcision has become uncircumcision.' Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if it fulfills the law, judge you even with your written code and circumcision, a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is the circumcision which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision, that is of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not from men but from God." And Paul simply deals with this by alluding to the covenant. And he simply says, "You have to understand that this side of the cross, there has been a new covenant made, and Jesus' blood has ratified the new covenant. And that new covenant is inclusive of Jew and Gentile. And therefore, the Jew or the one who is truly the people of God are the ones that aren't necessarily physically circumcised, but the

one who has been circumcised in heart, the one that knows Me, the one that truly keeps My commandments, the one that understands and knows Me."

You see, what happened in the Bible is, by the time we get to Jeremiah chapter 9, verse 25 and 26, God makes a very serious statement to the household of Israel. He says, "I will judge the circumcised with the uncircumcised." He says, "Judah, Egypt," and He goes through all the nations, and He says, "I will judge the circumcised with the uncircumcised," because He realized this, that circumcision was not the main thing, but a new creature, but a new heart. And Paul picks this up and says in Galatians chapter 6, verse 15, "Neither circumcision avails for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." What means something today is not the outward external conformity to the Old Testament commandment, as it were, of circumcision, but the newness of life in the Spirit.

This is the point that Paul is seeking to make, as he explains in this passage. Let us go back to Colossians 2 as we seek to understand this passage and make some application.

In Colossians 2, Paul introduces the concept of circumcision, saying, "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ" (Colossians 2:11). He tells us about this circumcision and how it is different from the Old Testament circumcision. He says that this circumcision is made without hands, meaning it is the work of the Holy Spirit, not of a priest, nor the father of a household, not from Abraham, nor from Moses. It is a spiritual circumcision.

Paul goes on to explain that this circumcision is not only without hands, but it is also "by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh" (Colossians 2:11). This circumcision does not merely involve the cutting off of the foreskin of the flesh, but rather, it deals with the entirety of man's sinfulness and the old man that we used to be in Adam. This circumcision of the heart cuts off our old person and makes us entirely new in Christ Jesus, far greater than the Old Testament circumcision. He calls it "the circumcision of Christ" (Colossians 2:11), a Christian circumcision belonging to Christ, by whom He is the administrator, not Moses nor Abraham. Our identity is to be found in Christ because He circumcises with the circumcision not made with hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh.

Think about that. Paul continues, "Buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (Colossians 2:12). He goes on to describe this spiritual operation, this spiritual surgery that has taken place in the hearts

of believers. We have been buried with Him, raised with Him, and being buried and raised with Him, we are now new in Him. It was through the power of God when we believed in Christ that we rose in resurrection life. Paul is simply saying that this is the New Testament circumcision, the counterpart of the Old Testament circumcision, the real circumcision, as it were, the one that truly means something to God.

Now, what does this mean for us? Well, it means a lot. A lot of precious truths come from these realities. Firstly, most of us here, if not all, are Gentiles. In the Old Testament, if you wanted to be part of God's covenant people, you would need to be circumcised. You would need to go under the ritualistic, external ways of the Old Covenant people to be able to receive and enter into the blessings provided for them in the covenant relationship. If you decided not to be circumcised, as was read this morning, you would be cut off from among the people of God.

Do you understand what this means for us on this side of the cross? We are no longer strangers to the covenants of promise. We are no longer strangers from God but fellow citizens. We have been blessed with the blessings that are in Christ Jesus. God has opened wide the floodgates to the Gentiles. God has spread out the gospel to the nations, and He has said to we who are people who are far off, "Come unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 45:22).

Do you understand what this means? It means that the blessings of the covenant come to us Gentiles also, without having to submit ourselves to Judaism. It also means that there is unity among all those who belong to Christ, as it says in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." Through faith in Him, we are one.

In the Old Covenant, women had their identity because of their relationship to the circumcised male. They were known by that, as it were; it was the heads of the family that gave them their identity as being part of the covenant people. But in Christ Jesus, you may be a woman, the only one that is saved in your household, the only partaker of the covenant in your household, but you belong to Christ and His entire family. This is the blessing of the New Covenant: there is no longer that distinction. A new heart has been given, a new covenant has been made, a new creation has come into existence, and all the blessings that are in Christ Jesus are ours because of His covenant relationship to us: adoption as sons, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and all the blessedness of the promises of God are ours in Christ.

This should cause our hearts to rejoice. We are 2,000 years removed from

the tension that existed in relation to Jew and Gentile, but we were once considered "dogs" in their sight, and we were alienated from the life of God. But God, in His mercy, through His Son, has brought us in, and we are blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus. We are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29).

Not only that, but Colossians 2:11 also says that we have been spiritually circumcised, a circumcision without hands. Do you know what that means for us, brethren? It means that we are new. If you are in Christ, you are a new creation; all things are passed away, behold, all things are become new (2 Corinthians 5:17). The reality is that you are not the same man you used to be; you are not the same woman you used to be. There has been grace extended to you in God's covenant, and He has saved you in mercy. He has done a spiritual surgery in your heart, and He has given you a new heart, a new soul, a new mind, a new way of thinking, a new life, and your identity is now wrapped up in Him. You are not the person you used to be in Adam any longer.

In the New Covenant, He says, "Their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more" (Hebrews 8:12). Satan comes to those who are in Christ and reminds us of our sins, our guilt, and our shame. He brings to our minds all the things that we have done in the past, saying, "How can you really belong to God when you have done this against Him? How can you really belong to God when you have blasphemed His name? How can you really be loved by God when you have sinned against His commandments? How can you really be loved by God when you haven't read your Bible this morning, or prayed, or served Him as you ought to this week? Truly, God can't love someone like you." Satan reminds us of our degradation, our shame, and our guilt.

But the Bible teaches us that if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, a new creation. We are no longer the people we used to be. So when Satan comes to us and says, "You are this way," we reply to him and say, "I have been forgiven by the blood of Jesus Christ. I belong to Him, not because of my circumcision, not because of my deeds, not because of what I have done, not because of my performance. I belong to Him because of Him. He has circumcised my heart without hands. He has done a surgery in my soul. He has brought me from death unto life. It is because of Him."

And we can stand upon the Word of God, knowing that when Satan comes to tempt us, as he did Joshua in the Old Testament and Zechariah, we can be reminded of that new robe that cloaks us, that robe of righteousness because of His covenant mercy and His love. We are a new creature, a new creation.

But how has this new creation affected the Christian? This brings us to another point, and our last point of application is very important. I want us to see in verse number 11 what it teaches us. It says, "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by the putting off of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ. Then it says, buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

How has this spiritual circumcision affected us? Well, the words "buried with Him" and "raised with Him" explain it all. All the blessings that come to us in Christ Jesus come as a result of our union with Him. And in Romans chapter 6, Paul elaborates on this very same thing, which baptism signifies, as in this text as well. Turn with me there, if you like, to Romans chapter 6.

The passage says, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, or destroyed, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin."

This is the exact same truth that Colossians is referring to, and it's this idea that we have been united with Christ in His death and in His resurrection. And Paul, here in this passage, says that the body of sin might be done away with, that Christ has taken us unto Himself in His death, we have died with Him, and our old man, the man we used to be in Adam, that was a slave to sin and lust and passions, has been buried in the ground.

And as Christ was raised up, so we were raised up with Him to walk in a life that is new, by the power of the Holy Spirit, no longer slaves to sin, but as the Bible says, slaves unto righteousness, servants of God and of His Son. And this is the blessing that has been conferred on us because of the work of Jesus Christ. The body of the sins of the flesh has been put away.

You know what that means? That sin shall no longer reign in your body. That those who truly belong to Christ have power over sin. This attitude that exists in many of our hearts today is wrong, that I can't overcome this or that there is no power simply to shake this sin in my life, that I'm just stuck, I can't get out of it.

My friend, the Bible teaches us that we war in our Christian warfare not in a position of slavery but from a position of freedom. We fight from ground that has already been won. We fight from victory unto victory. We fight a battle that has already been won because the body of sin has been destroyed, meaning that we do not need to live lives of sin any longer.

That the old man that we used to be in Adam has been destroyed, and his power has been broken, and even though there are appeals to our desires, there are appeals to the lust of our flesh, and the principle of sin still remains in us, we are no longer slaves and servants to our lusts and passions. We've been freed, set free, why? Because we've been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through faith, and in that death, in that burial, and in that resurrection, the body of the sins of the flesh have been put away.

Which means, next time you are confronted with lust, you can assure yourself that I died to that in Christ. Next time you are confronted with anger or bitterness or envy, you can remind yourself that I died to that sin in Christ. Next time you are confronted with evil thoughts, next time you are confronted with passions that are against God, when you are confronted with sin and this lack of desire to worship God, you can simply say, "I died to all that in Christ."

And when Satan says, "No, no, you haven't," you can remind him that I was buried with Christ and raised with Him, and when I was raised with Him, that old man that I used to be in Adam, he was gone. It doesn't mean you don't have similar temptations; it doesn't mean that you are not going to have struggles, but what marks the Christian from the unchristian is a power, a deliverance from sin.

We are no longer servants of sin, and so Paul picks up this theme in verse 17 and 18. He says, "But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered, that is the gospel, and having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness."

This is our joy; this is our comfort. Listen, false teachers usually bewitch people at this very point. They come to the struggling Christian and say, "Oh, well, see, you're not living the way you should be, and things aren't good for you and going well for you. Maybe you've got it all wrong. Maybe this whole idea of faith alone in Christ and this whole idea of Christ being everything and complete is wrong. Maybe you need to also entertain the idea that there is more to Christianity than Christ. Surely there's got to be more, just a little bit more meditation, maybe just a little bit more

blending of the eastern religions because they had something they could offer also. Maybe just a little bit more of philosophy, maybe a little bit more of empathy. Don't you want to live a happy life? Don't you want to live a comfortable life? Don't you want to live a joyous life?" And they say, "Take this road, take this road away from Christ."

But these are not the answer. What Paul brings us back to is this one thing: that you are, and we are, in Christ, new, and that there's nothing of the old, and there's nothing that may come in the future that can make us more in Christ than we already are, and that we are new in Him. And so, we don't need to look for other things. We have a victory and a power that has been brought within us by the circumcision of Christ.

And so, let us take encouragement by that this morning, that the body of our sin has been destroyed through our union with Jesus Christ because He has raised us and changed us and circumcised our hearts. Amen.