

WHAT ALL MUST RECEIVE - THE CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART

Midweek Sermon 6th January 2021

v11. “Wherefore remember, that ye *being* in time past **Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands**”. Paul here describes the Gentile Ephesians before their conversion to Christ, and he uses OT terminology to do so. He employs the technical terms circumcision and uncircumcision to describe the great gulf between the sinner and God, circumcision being the Old Testament sign of being in covenant with God. So uncircumcision means those not in covenant with God, unbelievers who are banished from His presence. So the Ephesians prior to coming to Christ were estranged from God. Where there is estrangement there must be reconciliation, for any communion between man and God to exist. Only the Lord Jesus Christ can provide the means of reconciliation, and he came into the world to do just that. So to understand Christian message there must be an understand-

ing of the stark reality of existing estrangement between man and God. This estrangement is an enmity and an alienation, and Paul uses the word ‘uncircumcision’ to describe it.

v12. “That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world”. We note here that Paul refers to the unconverted as being "aliens". They do not belong to the kingdom of God. To the Jew ‘uncircumcision’ meant being utterly unclean, and outside of the sphere of God’s blessing. Circumcision was the outward sign of being a true Israelite, a son of Abraham, one of God’s own. Uncircumcision signified the opposite. Paul is addressing Gentile Christians in Ephesus and its environs; yet he uses this Jewish technical term, which means that we Gentiles today must also get to grips with it and understand its true significance.

v11. "Remember that ye were in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision". So Paul exhorts these Christians to remember their former condition as non-Christians, to remember their complete and utter separation from God; to remember that they were once outsiders from God’s kingdom, and that this was clearly seen in their flesh, in that they did not have in their bodies the outward mark of being in covenant with God. So remember your former uncircumcised state, says Paul, and what a blessed rescue from that awful state you have now experienced. Remember that you used to be called 'the Uncircumcision', that you were formerly *not* the people of God, but utterly alienated from

God, and abiding under his wrath. The Jews called all Gentiles by this name of 'the Uncircumcision'. It implied disgrace, impurity, separation from God.

In Old Testament times there was only one nation in all the earth which possessed the knowledge of God's truth; there was only one nation which was not separated from God, and God told this one nation to distinguish itself from the rest of men by means of circumcision, this outward sign administered in their very persons. Circumcision was the badge, the certification, that the Israelites were indeed God's people of God. This Old Testament physical rite is full of spiritual significance for us today, for under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the terminology continues to be employed by Paul here in the New Testament.

With the passing away of the necessity of the Old Testament ceremonial laws including circumcision, and with the revelation of God's truth to *all* nations, and not just to Israel, we now tend to refer to non-believers, not as the uncircumcised, but rather as the unbaptised, or better still, the unconverted, but all expressions mean essentially the same thing. The uncircumcised are those without mercy, those still wallowing in the pollution of their sin; those utterly separated from the presence of God. So Paul is telling these Ephesians Christians, Remember that you used to be uncircumcised; remember how abject your former condition really was, until you came to Christ.

v12. "That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers

from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world”.

"And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them. And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS" (Luke 2:20-21). So the infant Jesus was circumcised when just over a week old. In fact, it was not until he was circumcised that he formally received the name Jesus, which word actually means in Hebrew, 'the Lord saves'. So the Lord Jesus Christ Himself was circumscised as a child, so we as New Testament Christains cannot ignore its significance. The symbolism of Circumcision is the removal of man's corrupted fallen nature, a nature corrupted by sin, sin being that which separates man from God. So circumcision is about the removal of corruption, and the consequent reconciliation of sinful man with God.

The question of course must be asked, Why did the infant Jesus, who did not inherit Adam's sinful nature - because he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin - why did he need to be circumcised? Well, when our Lord was born as a man, the Old Testament ceremonial laws were still in force, and they would continue to be so until his death and resurrection. He came perfectly to fulfil God's law, and so he submitted totally to it, not only the moral law which stands for all time, but also the ceremonial law, which was temporary, but remained in force during his earthly sojourn. So throughout his earthly life he would keep the Jewish feasts

and ceremonies.

We read for example how the Lord went up to the Passover in Jerusalem : this was to fulfil the law. This then is why he also underwent circumcision. I doing so he was identifying with, and actually representing, the sinful men whom he had come to save. He came to bear their sin in his own Person. So he underwent the ceremony which it was required of sinful Israelites to undergo, if they were to have any fellowship with God, namely the ceremony denoting the removal of man's corruption. Circumcision, then, is very instructive, for it teaches us that even God's chosen people Israel were sinful by nature, and were therefore utterly estranged from God. So God required that the Israelite be circumcised as an outward sign that his inward corruption needed to be removed, that he needed to be given a new heart which delighted in holiness and in the service of God.

Since the birth of our Lord Old Testament Israel has developed into the New Testament church, which is made up of people of every tribe and tongue. Those from any nation who today repent of sin and believe in Christ become true Israelites, in covenant with God, and reconciled to him. They are baptised, and so become the New Test equivalent of the circumcised Israelite in Old Testament times. So there is a distinct parallel between circumcision and faith in Christ. Conversely, all those today who refuse to come to Christ are the equivalent of the uncircumcised Gentiles of the Old Testament period. They are outside of God's kingdom and in a state of deadly separation from him.

v12. "That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world". Here then is a perfect description of the condition of all unbelievers in our own day. Every unbeliever is an utter stranger to God; he does not belong to the blessed community which is spiritual Israel, the church; indeed, he is nothing less than God's enemy. He is a stranger to the promises of God whereby forgiveness and eternal salvation are conferred. He is actually abiding under the everlasting wrath of God because of his sin and his refusal to believe. Now this is the situation that the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to put right. He came to deal with man's corrupted, polluted, uncircumcised state.

"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). So Paul is stressing in these v11&12 the enormous gulf between the unbeliever and God; he is stressing that every man without Christ is spiritually uncircumcised.

"Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:13). This is a similar statement of man's alienation from God. God cannot countenance any sin at all. In his perfect holiness and purity he must condemn all sin.

"Thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness : neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand in

thy sight : thou hatest all workers of iniquity" (Psalm 5:4-5). So there we are told in the plainest terms possible just how God regards unrepentant unbelievers. He graciously reaches out in love to them, offering them mercy, yet he also looks upon them, in their hardhearted rebellion against him, with a perfect, pure, holy and righteous hatred. So far from the Christian Gospel being about God's indulgent love of everyone, no matter what they are like, and whether they or not they repent, the Bible actually tells us that God *hates* all workers of iniquity. Let us remember just how horrible the plight of the unbeliever really is, and let us take care not to misrepresent the love of God in such a way that it gives the impression that all are already basking in God's mercy regardless of whether or not there is heartfelt repentance. To be without heartfelt repentance is to be uncircumcised in heart and outside of the kingdom of God.

Let us consider such a man, who was in fact the Lord's sworn enemy at the very time when the infant Jesus was himself being circumcised, ie Herod. Was Herod basking in the benefits of God's unconditional love for him when he was trying to have the infant Jesus cruelly murdered, and when he caused Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt? Of course not. Herod was rather under God's wrath. He was in a very obvious manner an uncircumcised one, one in an utter state of alienation from God. But it is not just the Herods of this world who are in that alienated state; but all who have failed to repent of sin, and submit to Christ. Let us note here how Paul describes *all* the Ephesians before their conversions as being under God's wrath. They were all once outside of the kingdom of God. So

the problem of estrangement from God, of being spiritually uncircumcised, is a universal one. It is the dire condition of everyone without Christ.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We begin to see, therefore, just how serious failure to believe in Christ really is. Unbelief is not a state of harmless neutrality, but one of open rebellion against Almighty God. Man is not by nature a child of God but is by nature estranged from him. It is for this reason that man so desperately needs to hear the message of reconciliation between man and God through faith in Christ. There is no more urgent message for our world today than this, that a Saviour has come, and that all must turn to him. It concerns everyone to know this, no matter what their existing religion, or whether they be of no religion at all. All must be made aware that they are estranged from God, that they are in a dreadful, uncircumcised condition, spiritually speaking. Without faith in Christ there can be no hope of heaven, but only the certain prospect of God's eternal wrath. All men therefore need to be spiritually circumcised; all need to have their inward corruption removed.

"Circumcise yourselves to the Lord ... lest my fury go forth like fire" (Jeremiah 4:4).

"All the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart" (Jeremiah 9:26). So circumcision is in fact all about the heart. Israel had the outward sign of circumcision, but they were devoid of what it represented; they had uncircumcised hearts. In New Testament times the outward ceremony of baptism signifies

exactly what circumcision once did. Baptism also is all about the heart. Like circumcision it signifies man's need to have his inward corruption removed.

(Paul of baptised Christians), "In Christ ye were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands" (Colossians 2:11). So Paul actually describes Christian conversion as a circumcision, not the circumcision made with hands which verse 11 speaks of, but a spiritual circumcision. To become a Christian is to be inwardly circumcised; it is to be born anew; it is to receive the Holy Spirit. A Christian is one who has been inwardly circumcised by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. A Christian is one whose estrangement from God has been radically dealt by the receiving of a new heart. So it is Christ who inwardly baptises us, who inwardly washes us, who removes from us the corruption of our fallen natures, who inwardly circumcises us.

All men have a deep problem within. All people need radical heart surgery. All without exception need the circumcision which only Christ can accomplish. Jesus Christ is he who circumcises the heart. He alone can remove the alienation between man and God, and he will turn none away who come to him with repentant hearts; but those who do not come will remain strangers and aliens, banished from God's presence, not only in this life, but for evermore.