

To the world of grace through the circumcision of the heart

<Summary of last time>

Last week we studied the sins of the elect Jews. Their hypocrisy was the same sin as the Gentiles and built up God's wrath. The Jews were too concerned with the Law and were judging the Gentile Christians. This thing was a disgrace to God's name. But the gospel of Jesus Christ does not favor the Jews or the Greeks, but offers eternal life through faith in Him to the Jews and the Gentiles.

<Background to Today's Word (Acts 15)>

At 3 weeks ago, the Jewish Christians were pressing Gentile Christians because of their commitment to the law. Acts 15:1, "Some men come down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'" By "Some men" he is referring to Jewish Christians who were Pharisees (Acts 15:5). They even taught that they could not be saved without circumcision.

This circumcision controversy was very confusing not only to the Roman Church but also to the early Christians of the faith. Eventually, Peter, the Apostles, and the elders decided through the Jerusalem Conference that circumcision was not required for saving. However, they wrote a letter to the churches, telling them to "avoid food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood (Act15:20). Although they decided that circumcision was not required, they did include some Jewish laws. Even so, they could not be completely free from the law.

<What is the meaning of circumcision? (Rom. 2:25-27)>

Paul reminds them that even if they are circumcised and become Jews, if they do not keep God's law, there is no point in being circumcised. Instead, he says that if uncircumcised Gentiles keep God's law, it is a more righteous way of life and God is pleased with them.

<Circumcision of the heart is more important (Rom. 2:28-29). >

See verse 28. 'A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical (v. 28).No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a

man's praise is not from men, but from God (29) ' Here, "a Jew outwardly" is a Jew circumcised in the flesh according to the Law of Moses. A "Jew inwardly" is a Gentile Christian of that time who was not circumcised in the body but was by the Spirit renewed through faith in Jesus Christ. Times have changed, but that is referring to Christians like us.

Is the expression "circumcision of the heart" that appears here a novel way for Paul to say it? No, it is not. The phrase "circumcision of the heart" appears in Jeremiah's prophecy around B.C. 620, **Jeremiah 4:4, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done – burn with no one to quench it."**

The prophet Jeremiah was prophesying to the kings, priests, and people of Judah to prepare for the coming destruction by circumcising their hearts, but in the end, the Kingdom of Judah fell to Babylon in 587 BC (586 B.C.). The Jews should have known from this painful history that God wanted them to be circumcised not only in the flesh but also in the heart.

Paul reminds the Jewish Christians of this. To be a Christian who is inwardly Jewish is to be one who lives in the new gospel age, in which one is saved by believing in Jesus Christ. This faith was given by the Holy Spirit to Jews and Greeks alike.

<Circumcision of the hearts of modern Christians >

Christianity has been around for over 2,000 years, and we are not distracted by the controversy over circumcision. However, we may live our lives of faith according to various rules, though not as strict as the Jewish law.

For example, we must go to church on the Sabbath, we must give offering regularly, we must volunteer in the church as soon as we are baptized, and so on. These rules somehow become like the Jewish law for us Christians, and when we do well, we get lofty, and when we don't do well, we deny ourselves and even doubt God's love.

When I used to work as a clinical psychologist in the mental hospital, one of my clients was an OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) patient, a young man about 20 years old. He felt door knobs are dirty and could not touch doors with his bare hands, so he always wore white gloves. This young man, who was supposed to learn and work vigorously, ended up not being able to go to school and withdraw himself and stayed in his room.

In the back of his mind was "anxiety". In order to get rid of his anxiety, he made various rules for himself and kept his mind stable by following them. When I look at Jewish Christians who are too attached to the law and cannot live freely by the grace of

Jesus Christ, I think of them as being similar to this patient.

This kind of religious anxiety occurs especially when life is not going well. A breakdown of marital or parent-child relationships, a sudden car accident, a long suffering with illness, an unfair trial, unemployment, withdrawal from school, and so on. When a situation appears bad in human sight, it is easy for even Christians to ask God, "Did I do something wrong?"

When I got divorced, one very serious Christian once asked me, "You didn't give a tithe, did you?" Since then, I wondered if this was really the right question, and what God was really thinking about it. For a long time, I puzzled with this question.

But the Bible answered my question clearly. When I studied the Bible, I found that the gospel is totally different from the values of the world. Therefore, God wants us who believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ and to live a new life. God is inviting us to live in a completely new world of gospel grace that is not bound by the law.

Ephesians 4:22-24, "You were taught, with regard to our former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; (v. 22) to be made new in the attitude of your minds; (v. 23), and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (v. 24)."

God is telling us Christians to put off our old selves and put on the new selves. The new way of life Jesus is also taught. In Matthew 9:14-17, John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus a question. "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"(v.14) Jesus said, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast (v. 15). "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse (v. 16). Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved (v. 17)." In the fasting argument with the religious leaders, Jesus taught that the gospel of Jesus Christ is like new wine. The hearts of those who accept this gospel should become new wineskins. Our hearts should be renewed daily by the Holy Spirit. This revolution in gospel thinking is necessary for both the Jewish Christians of 2,000 years ago and for us today.

<The advantage of being a Jew (Rom. 3:1-2)>

Next, I would like to turn to chapter 3. I have been pointing out that the Jews were wrong in their insistence on the Law and the issue of circumcision. However, there is advantage of being God's elect Jews (v. 1). God "entrusted the word of God" to the

circumcised Jews, as verse 2 says. God, through the prophet Isaiah, was speaking about the role of the Jewish people. **Isaiah 42:6, "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles."**

God chose the Jews and entrusted them with the Word of promise for the salvation of the Gentiles as well as the Jews. God wanted the Jews to be a light to the nations. (The Law, Theological Dictionary of the Old and New Testaments, Shinkyou syuppan, p. 475) But the Jews crucified Jesus and did not believe in Him.

<God is faithful (Rom. 3:3-4) >

Please look at verse 3. **"What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?"(v.3)** 'some did not have faith' refers to the Jews who crucified Jesus Christ and those who did not believe in Him. God chose the Jews and promised them about salvation through the cross of Jesus, but the Jews crucified Him. This shows the unfaithfulness of the Jews who were entrusted with God's promise (Acts 3:11-26). It would appear that their unfaithfulness hindered God's plan.

But look at verse 4. **"Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: so that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge (v. 4)."**The unfaithfulness of the Jews led to Jesus' crucifixion, but what was the result? God resurrected Jesus Christ on the third day from the grave. This completed God's plan of salvation. God's plan of salvation did not stop just because the chosen people, the Jews, did not accept the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even today, the Israelites do not believe in Jesus Christ. However, it is surprising to see in the 2,000 years of Christian history that God's salvation of the Gentiles has been fulfilled as promised, and now the salvation of the Jews is also steadily progressing. People are unfaithful and break their promises, but God is faithful and true to keep what He has promised. This will be discussed in more detail in Romans 11, so please look forward to it.

<Sanctification of the congregation (Rom.3:5-8) >

In verses 5-8, we see the sophistry of those who criticize Christianity. They say, **"If it is grace to be saved even without obeying the law, then isn't it okay to sin in order to be blessed even more?"**

It seems that there were people at that time who slandered the gospel of grace in this way. Even today, there are those who say, "It is okay to sin immorally because you will be saved and go to heaven." However, Christians who have a correct understanding of the gospel are grateful for the grace of salvation and live by the Holy Spirit, nurturing

their personality as God's children. That is sanctification. This will be discussed in chapters 12.

<A faithful God and the perfection of our salvation >

Through today's text, I began to reflect on my life of faith. I was a serious person like you. Especially in my life of faith, I was a person who strictly corrected myself. I would go to Sunday services no matter what. I would always give my offering. I also volunteered every week. I was a person who worked hard every day to live as a model Christian in society as well.

It must have been 20 years ago, when I once attended a lecture by the late Dr. Hayao Kawai, president of the Japan Society of Clinical Psychologists and former Commissioner of the Cultural Affairs Agency (Bunkachyou). After the lecture, there was a question and answer period. One of the clinical psychologists asked a question. He said, "Doctor, my client is not attending school. He himself wants to die because this way of life is of no use to this world. To this I honestly question whether it is a good idea to live a life that is of no use to society."

How would you answer this question? It seems that even a professional counselor who empathize with people's feelings did not know how to deal with people who are useless to society. However, Dr. Hayao Kawai, the best psychologist in Japan, answered. "Yes, that's right. This client made a wise choice. What is wrong with being of no use to society?" Dr. Kawai threw his way of thinking at the counselor, which was not an answer at all. He seemed to be saying that a revolution in thinking should happen to the counselor.

I honestly did not understand Dr. Hayao Kawai's answer at the time because I was working hard, earning a high salary, and living a life that was an example to others in society and in the church. At that time, I was in a position of strength, so I did not understand the feelings of the weak people who could do nothing.

However, as you all know, I am divorced and still struggling to raise my two children on my own. Looking back over the past 16 years, I naturally could not go to services on Sundays when the children had a fever, and I could never keep my rule of keeping the Sabbath. Then I became depressed myself and was unable to serve the church at all. When I was in Canada, you all in the Mennonites took care of me and my children a lot. ^^I also lost my job as a clinical psychologist, which I loved, and my career as a university lecturer too. Naturally, I was struggling financially and was unable to donate for the church, so I was living a life that was not a role model for society and the church.

My self-esteem was getting worse, and I was being condemned by my own law, 'If you are a Christian, you should be this way! I was being condemned by my own law, which says, "You are useless! And you are hindering God's glory. Why don't you die?"

But when I entered seminary by God's grace and studied the Bible, I found that God was saying something completely different. The entire Bible was filled with God's message of love. He said, "Let it be as you are. I died on the cross because I love you. You are my precious daughter (Isaiah 43:4)." God continued to love me even though I was doing nothing for Him. When I look back on my hard life, I see the patient love of my brothers and sisters in the church, the love of my family, and how God used all of this to love me all the time.

Thankfully, I suddenly realized that God had grown my children before I knew it. I was also led to seminary, and although it is still not enough, I was able to recover and able to serve the Word in this way to you all. Even though I was unfaithful at times, doubting even God's deep love for me, God was faithful and continued to love me. He continued to fulfill His plan for me.

How about you? Are you disappointed, saying, 'I am not doing what I should be doing, and I am useless in society, in the church, and at home?' In reality, we may be unfaithful and incompetent, unable to keep God's promises. But God is faithful, and He does not give up on our unfaithfulness, but continues to love us. And He continues to fulfill His plan for us. He leads our lives and blesses us greatly. Do you believe it?

Today's Word tells us to circumcise our hearts. This circumcision of the heart is to repent deeply of our sin to appreciate God's deep love and grace of the cross, and to live with new values of gospel grace like a new wineskins.

Prayer

Our loving Heavenly Father! Thank you for your Word today. We praise God for His faithfulness. Even we do nothing for you, but you God our Father is pleased with our very existence. I want to have a relationship with the loving Father every day. I want to commune with you every day. Through the grace of Jesus Christ who died on the cross, we ask the Holy Spirit to guide us so that we may live our lives of faith freely, spontaneously, and at ease, without being bound by the law. Please give peace from God to our brothers and sisters who are suffering from illnesses and various troubles, and free them from suffering. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.