

Righteousness Through Faith or Signs?

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Some of us aren't really absolutely sure of God's existence this morning, I know that. And some of us aren't sure why we have a problem with anxiety or restlessness. But there are many of us here this morning who do know that the reason for the restlessness and the anxiety that we have is because we aren't sure of our Creator's approval. And really it's because we're not sure whether we're right with him or not, and we don't quite know how to get right with him.

Now that's what righteousness means. Righteousness means being right with our Creator, or it means getting right with him. I think many of us have mistaken it for morality. It isn't morality first and foremost; it is being right with our Creator. It's like an ordinary relationship between you and your girlfriend, or you and your boyfriend. It's just an unclouded communication between the pair of you, and there's no shadow in your relationship. You are absolutely at home with each other. That's what righteousness means. It means being absolutely right with God, having no doubt of him and him having no doubt of you.

Now many people, including Satan, have tried to change it into morality. Now, you remember that happened in Genesis 3:5 if you look at it for a moment. Genesis 3:5, you remember, Satan suggested, "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." And ever from that time many people have been suggesting to us that righteousness is knowing the difference between good and evil and it's being good and avoiding evil.

Now, that isn't righteousness brothers and sisters, that's morality. And that results usually from receiving the righteousness of God and being right with God. So normally, morality results from being right with God. But being right with God itself is not involved in morality. It is concerned with having an unclouded relationship between ourselves and God. I think a lot of us this morning may say, "Well now Pastor there's really a good reason for us thinking that righteousness is being moral, because you know the whole testament is filled with, 'Thou shall not steal, thou shall not kill, thou shall not bear false witness.' And no wonder so many of us think that righteousness is being right with God."

Yes brothers and sisters, I think that is true but God has never changed from the very first man that he made right with himself. And he did not make that man right with himself through morality. God has never changed. People have misused the law and tried to contort us into all kinds of golden rules, and doing good to your neighbor, and being good enough so that God will accept you, but that was never God's basis for getting right with himself from the beginning of creation. God has never changed he has maintained the same system for getting people right with himself right down the years.

Now what is that system? Well, it's the one you remember he used with the man whom we often regard as the father of legalism and the father of law, Abraham. Abraham didn't get right with God because he was good enough to be accepted by God. He got right with God by another means. You can find it there, Genesis 15:4-6. We have read it before. Genesis 15:4, "And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir.' And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Now ever from the beginning of creation that has always been God's way of making us right with himself. Whenever he found a man or a woman who believed him, who believed that he was the God of the universe, that he was a loving father, that he didn't hate us, that he really did love us and wanted to be close to us -- every time a man or a woman believed God and acted upon that belief, God made that man or woman right with himself. He gave them righteousness; he made them right with himself. And that's always been God's way.

I think a lot of us really get caught up because we say, "Well, wouldn't this mean that all men ought to become Jews? We all ought to become like Abraham? We all ought to become Jews. We all ought to do the same kinds of things as the Jews did." And you remember what that was if you'd like to look at it in Genesis 17. It certainly includes at least that physical sign that they put on their bodies. It's Genesis 17:9-10, "And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.'" And then in Verse 12, "He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money, shall be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."

And many of us say, "Well, shouldn't we make sure that we have that cutting in our body, and that would enable us to be right with God?" Now brothers and sisters when was Abraham made right with God, before he was circumcised or after he was circumcised? And you know the answer. You actually turn back [meaning the event in Gen. 15:6 took place before that in Gen. 17] in the Bible to get to Genesis 15:6 and read, "And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness."

In other words, you don't need to become a Jew. You don't need to cut your body to be right with God. You are right with God the moment you believe that God is your loving Father, and that he really does love you, and that you can trust him. And then you act on that in your own life. And you no longer fear, and worry, and are anxious but you trust that God is in charge of you as he is in charge of the sparrow. And that makes you right with God. As a result of that your life naturally becomes more like his. But that's the way you get right with him.

You may say, "Well alright Pastor but where does the circumcision come in? What's the purpose of circumcision?" And you can see it there in Genesis 17:11. "You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you." It was just a sign. It didn't cause faith, it didn't create righteousness. It was a sign of the righteousness that Abram already had because he believed God. It was like the covenant God made with Noah. God made a covenant with him, "I'll never again wipe out the earth with a flood, and I'll put a sign in the heavens, a rainbow. And whenever you see that sign you'll remember the covenant that I made with you. But I made it with you out of sheer grace. The rainbow didn't make me make it with you. I made it because I loved you and I want you to trust me." So it is with circumcision.

Now brothers and sisters, you may say, "Well, I mean, thank goodness there is no way in which we could pervert that sign." And there was no way in which the Jews could pervert it. But brothers and sisters, the Jews 'did' pervert the sign. The Jews took the sign and regarded it as more important than the inward faith. And you'll see that if you look at Acts 15:1. They had a whole

discussion and a whole disagreement in the early church over this silly sign. Acts 15:1, “But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’”

Now we would say, “That is ridiculous.” How could they take what is purely an outward sign and make it the very qualification for being accepted by God. And look in verse 5, “But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the Law of Moses.’” And you see that this wasn’t God’s plan at all.

The verses that we’re studying today make that clear. If you want to look at them they’re Romans 4. And it was plain that this wasn’t the way God wanted people to misuse the sign. Romans 4:9, “Is this blessing,” that of being right with God, “Pronounced only upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received circumcision as a sign or seal of righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.”

Yet in spite of all this the early church came along and said, “No, you need the sign. It doesn’t matter if you believe in Jesus, it doesn’t matter if you believe God has forgiven you, it doesn’t matter if you believe that you can trust him as your Father, you need the sign. Otherwise, you can’t be accepted by him.” And do you see brothers and sisters how ridiculous that was? The sign was only a sign of a relationship that already existed. In other words, Abraham was only circumcised because he was already right with God. And of course, you know, we say, “Well, that’s interesting but really it has very little to do with us today. We would never make that kind of mistake.”

Well, would you look at 1 Corinthians 1 and see the first miserable little bickering church? Really, it’s incredible how foolish we men can be. 1 Corinthians 1:11-13, “For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren.” Maybe they’re quarreling over whether Jesus has risen from the dead, or whether God is the loving Father? Something big! “What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; lest any one should say that you were baptized in my name.” And the miserable church was beginning to fall out over a sign.

And we say, “I’m glad we don’t do that.” And you know it. “Well, I was baptized, and I was confirmed, and I was received into membership therefore, it doesn’t matter whether I experienced any conviction of sin in my life. It doesn’t matter whether I ever repented of my sins. It doesn’t matter whether I ever gave my life to Jesus. I’ve received the sign, so I’m a child of God.” And brothers and sisters, you know so many of us labor under that. We make the sign of baptism the very basis of our righteousness with God when it isn’t at all. It is a sign of something that has already happened to us.

In other words, you can only be baptized into a state in which you already are, as Abraham was circumcised because of a relationship that he already had with the Father. And you know that some

of us well, we don't say that but we say, "Yeah, that's right. That's right, that kind of thing is stupid and naïve. That's not the important thing, that you're baptized and confirmed, it's that you're baptized as an infant. That's the vital thing. If you're baptized as an infant you're a child of God." And you feel you know, at least the Jews only misused the sign but here we are we tear apart the body of Christ on how we administer the sign. And then somebody comes along and says, "Yeah, that's stupid. Boy it's not baptism as an infant that's a nothing." And we say, "Ah, good somebody with sense at last." And they say, "Yeah, you must be baptized as an adult, that's the vital thing. And you must be baptized in a certain way as an adult." And we say, "Really? That's senseless that we fall out over the sign." And then some person comes along and says, "Yeah, it's vital you mustn't pour the water on, you mustn't immerse them, you must just sprinkle them." And then another group says, "No, you mustn't sprinkle them you must pour the water over their head when they're three months old." "No, that's madness you must immerse them when they're at the age of discretion."

Now brothers and sisters do you see? Ah the Father must look down upon us – we'll deal with the issues in a moment, but do you see the Father must look down upon us and say, "Well, the Jews I thought were bad, but at least they agreed on how to circumcise." So loved ones, do you see that we're in danger here. We're in danger of making the sign the cause of our relationship with God when it is not. It just isn't.

Now you may say, "Now Pastor, alright, but we don't want to just laugh at the thing. Is it really as unimportant as you are implying? Is there not clear scriptural direction about baptism?" And yeah, brothers and sisters, I think really it is not as important as we make it. I think for instance the scriptural attitude is there in 1 Corinthians 1:14. I think the attitude of an apostle to this is found there in Verse 14, "I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; lest any one should say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any one else.)" I think that is the attitude of a mature apostle to baptism, that baptism is not the big deal. Baptism is a sign and there is something more important than baptism.

But, let us look at some of the scriptural teaching about it. I think we find some of it there in Acts 2:38. Acts 2:38, "And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized.'" There's an order of events; the Bible tells us that. There's an order of events in connection with a sign. The inward attitude of trust to the Father must be there, otherwise, there's no point in giving any sign. The sign won't create the faith. The inward attitude of the heart is what is important, and it must come first.

Now you get it again in Acts 8:12. "But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women." And you see the adverbial clause of time, "When they believed Philip," then they were baptized. So, there is an order of events. The inward experience must be there otherwise, baptism is just a mockery.

Now, maybe we should look at what that inward experience should be. And you see it there in Acts 10:44 and 48. Acts 10:44-48, "While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 'Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days." The inward

experience, and trust, and reception of the Holy Spirit must be there. We must be born of the Spirit before we can be baptized and before baptism means anything.

Now some of you may say, "Well, brother, what about the mode and the time? Is there no direction in scripture about the mode of baptism?" Well you see, many brothers and sisters here this morning would say, "Yes, there is." So let's look at this piece in scripture that points to that. It's Acts 8:38, "And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing." It does seem that often in the New Testament people went down into the water and probably most of them experienced it the way Jesus did and was right immersed in the water and that signified for them the burial with Christ.

There are many people that became Christians without being immersed in water. For one thing, it was a real practical problem with the amount of water around Jerusalem when you were baptizing 3,000 people. So let's be sensible about it. Let's say, "Yes, it does seem on reading that it is believers who are baptized. And it does seem on plain reading of scripture that they went down into the water and were immersed. But let's face it that many, many of them must often have been in positions where there wasn't the water to be immersed and they weren't immersed and that didn't prevent them entering into all that God had given them."

I think it's important too to see that old Paul does mention in 1 Corinthians there a certain phrase that indicates that there was some practice in New Testament times, of baptizing the whole family. And you have it in 1 Corinthians 1:16, "I did baptize also the household of Stephanas." And I don't think one can afford cynically to look at all us poor Lutherans and Methodists and say, "Oh now, that doesn't mean he baptized the children as well." I think brothers and sisters that in that early time they had to signify this family was going to be brought up as a Christian family. I think that often the children were just included in the baptism. It wasn't believed that they were regenerated at that moment or that they had received the Spirit of Christ, but it was believed that they would no longer be brought up as pagan children but as children under the covenant of Jesus, and that later on they would enter into it by their own volition when they came to the age of discretion.

And I think it's important to see though the New Testament lays down broad lines, which really we should follow as God gives us grace, yet we should not look down on dear ones who interpret it in another way, because at the end of the day, all you're talking about is how you're going to cut the flesh. And whatever you do to the body, you will not create an inner attitude to God in the heart. It is just a sign.

Now maybe it would be good to look into the real meaning of baptism. So, could we just do that for a few minutes for the rest of the time? Let's go back to Jesus' words when baptism is first mentioned by him. It's Matthew 28:19, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Now those of you that know Greek know that the word in is really 'eis' 'into'. And it means baptize them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Now what does it mean to be baptized 'into' the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit? Well 'eis' obviously means that you enter into those three persons. That you are entering into them by actual experience. Now, how do you do that? Do you send up a rocket with a man in it and send

him up to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? How do you enter into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Now that's what we're really talking when we're talking about baptism.

Brothers and sisters, baptism is not first a matter of water. Otherwise, Jesus would not have said, "I have still a baptism to be baptized with." Because he was not meaning water, he was meaning the whole experience of Calvary. And again, and again, and again in the New Testament baptism is used as different experiences not water.

Now, what do we mean when we mean to be baptized into the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? How are you baptized into those three persons? Well God made it very plain to us in scripture with the use of the word. Romans 6:3-5, this is how we are baptized into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Romans 6:3-5, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

You are baptized into Jesus' death and burial and Jesus rises from the dead and takes you up with him into his Father. And that's how we are baptized into the Father and the Son. But it's by being willing to enter into Jesus' death to himself. And it's in view of that baptism into spiritual experience of Jesus' death, that God raises us into himself and then we are justified in being baptized with water. But the outward baptism with water is a sign of the inward baptism into the Father and the Son.

Now you may say, "Well, can you be baptized with water and not experience that?" Yes, you know you can. It happened often. It happened for instance in Acts 19 if you'd like to look at it. Acts 19:1-4, some people were baptized with water and knew nothing of that baptism into Christ's death. And so they had the outward sign but they had not the inward reality, the inward baptism. Acts 19:1, "While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' And they said, 'No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' And he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They said, 'Into John's baptism.' And Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Many of us have been baptized into the repentance of sins and we are good Jews. That's it. We know that our sins are forgiven but we have never been baptized into Christ's death and so we have little or no experience of victorious or pure life. We walk periodically in and out of obedience, because we have been baptized into a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of our sins. And I know brothers and sisters if I ask many of you do you believe you're right with God? You would say, "Yes, but I have great trouble because there are days when I live in continual defeat."

Do you see that many of us have been baptized into repentance for forgiveness of our sins but we have not been baptized into Jesus' death? And so the outward sign signifies more than actually exists in our own inward lives. What is the result of that? Well, many of us regard our lives as the norm for the Christian life. And then you see you get into all kinds of problems. Then people say, "Ah, well I was baptized so I must be a Christian, mustn't I?" Well, you can only be as much of a Christian as you believed for. You can only be as much of a Christian as you've been willing for God to make you. But do you see what happens? We have some of us who are baptized with water,

yes by immersion, and do not enter into Christ's death so we walk defeated Christians lives. But everybody says, "Well, they have the outward sign, they must be Christians."

Loved ones, the outward sign is only as meaningful as the inward experience is. And you see this is where we brothers and sisters, get into all kinds of contortion over what a Christian is. If we experienced a full baptism into Jesus as Christians, we would know there is only one kind of Christian. That is, a Christian that has been baptized into Christ's death and his burial, and has been raised into the presence of the Father at his right hand.

Now there is the other part of the baptism, that of the Holy Spirit. And you see it there, it's in 1 Corinthians 12:13. 1 Corinthians 12:13, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit." And the second part of baptism is being baptized 'by' the Holy Spirit, and being baptized 'with' the Holy Spirit. In other words, when you enter into Christ's death and his burial and rise with him in his resurrection, what happened to him happens to you. The Holy Spirit anoints you with himself and brings to you the purity and the power of Jesus' life.

Now that is a whole Christian baptism. Now you see where we get into troubles, we try to divide the thing up. We try to say, "Well, I can be baptized for the forgiveness of my sins without being baptized into his death. Well, I can be baptized into his death without being baptized with the Holy Spirit." And then we get John arguing one side of it and Interspersary arguing another and the Baptist arguing another and the Pentecostals arguing another. Brothers and sisters, let's stop trying to justify ourselves. Let's go to the Father and say, "Lord, I've been baptized, but I want to enter into all that you have for me."

Do you see brothers and sisters that it's time we stop this business of saying, "No, you're not a Christian because you're not baptized with the Holy Spirit," or, "You're not a Christian because you aren't walking in the victorious life." Brothers and sisters, we should be encouraging each other to enter into all that our baptism signifies, and stop this business of saying, "I'm here but I'm not there." We should be looking to the Father and saying, "Father, I know that baptism, whatever mode it is, baptism means baptism into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It means baptism into Jesus' death, and into his burial, and into his resurrection at your right hand, and then it means being baptized with your Holy Spirit. Father, I want all that you want me to have."

But dear ones, that's it. It's not the outward sign that's important. And loved ones, I say that to you in love, the immersion party. I'm for it, I'm with you. I haven't baptized an infant since I came to the Campus Church and for a Methodist that is heresy. But do you see that it's time for love. It's time for good sense. It's time for stopping this arguing over a silly sign, because all we're doing is encouraging each other to be preoccupied with the external instead of with the internal.

Now here's what I'm asking you, have you been baptized into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? And I'm not saying you're a second class citizen if you haven't been but I'm saying have you been baptized into Jesus' death and into his burial? That is, have you been willing to die to self with Jesus? To suffer all that he wants to suffer in your life, to face the kind of future that he wants for your life? And have you been baptized into his resurrection so that at this moment you dwell at the right hand of the Father far above all those petty little concerns that you used to have? And have you been baptized with his Holy Spirit? And don't you say, "Do you mean have I spoken with tongues?" – don't get into all that stuff. I'm asking you have you been willing

to obey the Holy Spirit fully in your life? Are you willing for the Holy Spirit to give you whatever gifts, or whatever fruit that he wants to give you? Well, that's what the Father wants.

Loved ones, could we get back to the simple gospel that the apostles preached, and stop trying to divide the thing up and let's see that outward baptism is a sign of a whole complete inward baptism into Christ's death, and resurrection, and into the Holy Spirit himself. And then you'll begin to really experience the victory and the power-filled witnessing life of a child of God.

So really, are you depending on the sign? Are you sitting there and saying, "I'm a Lutheran and I was baptized as an infant so I must be there. I don't feel I'm there and I have none of the marks of being there, but I must be there." And brothers and sisters, those of us who were immersed are we saying, "Well, I immersed as a Baptist and I know that's the one true gospel in the whole world and I know that I must have everything. I don't experience the fruit of the Spirit, I don't experience victory in my life, I can't witness, I'm miserable in my home, but I was baptized and I must be there."

Loved ones, let's forget that silly kind of argument, and let's go to the Father and say, "Lord, I want to experience all that you want me to experience." And really loved ones, as we let down those old silly defenses and stop straining and following our fathers and our forefathers down those labyrinthine endless arguments, as we stop following out in that direction and begin to attend to the inward reality, you'll see that God will form his body into a unity and into a oneness that will reveal him to the world.

Brother and sister, if you're sitting there and it's all new to you and all you know is, "Well, I'm a Lutheran," or, "I was confirmed." Well, will you begin to ask? Or if you're a miserable old Methodist like me who was baptized as an infant and you don't know exactly where you stand, will you begin to ask the Father, "Father, show me have I really been baptized or have I just had an outward sign?" And God will show you. As we attend to reality, he will reveal truth to us, so I pray he will with you.

Some of you may want to talk afterwards or pray, and really we'll be staying, some of us here, after the service. And I would ask you as brothers and sisters, if you could sit in your seats until the rest get out then you could come down to these front rows and just pray. And I'll be glad to talk or pray with you, my wife will, and some of the brothers and sisters will be here. And if we come over to you and you just want to pray and we ask you do you want to talk or pray just you say what you want you see. Don't feel you have to talk to somebody. Just stay. But if you have some feeling in your heart that you should get things straight, well this is a good place to do it. It's an easy place. Let us pray.

Father, we thank you for delivering us from the foolishness that we have walked in for so long all concerned with outward signs and with churchy symbols. Father, we thank you for showing us that it is the inward reality that counts, and all the signs in the world won't create that inward reality. So Father, we want to stand on that inward reality ourselves. And if we have not been baptized into Jesus' death and into his burial and his resurrection to your right hand, if we have not been baptized with the Holy Spirit in the way that you want us to, Father, will you reveal that to us? We will listen to you.

Lord, we won't listen to any man; we won't listen to churches; we won't listen to groups who tell us, "This is what to believe, or that." We want to listen to you. You know our condition you are

able to tell us. But Father, we want to please you we want to be right with you inside in our hearts. We trust you to bring us into that this day for your glory. Amen.